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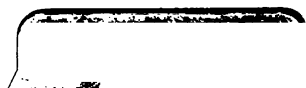
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GRAINGER'S THORN.

VOL. I.



GRAINGER'S THORN.

A Novel.



BY

THOMAS WRIGHT

(THE 'JOURNEYMAN ENGINEER'),

AUTHOR OF

'SOME HABITS AND CUSTOMS OF THE WORKING CLASSES,'

'JOHNNY ROBINSON,' 'THE BANE OF A LIFE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.—VOL. I.

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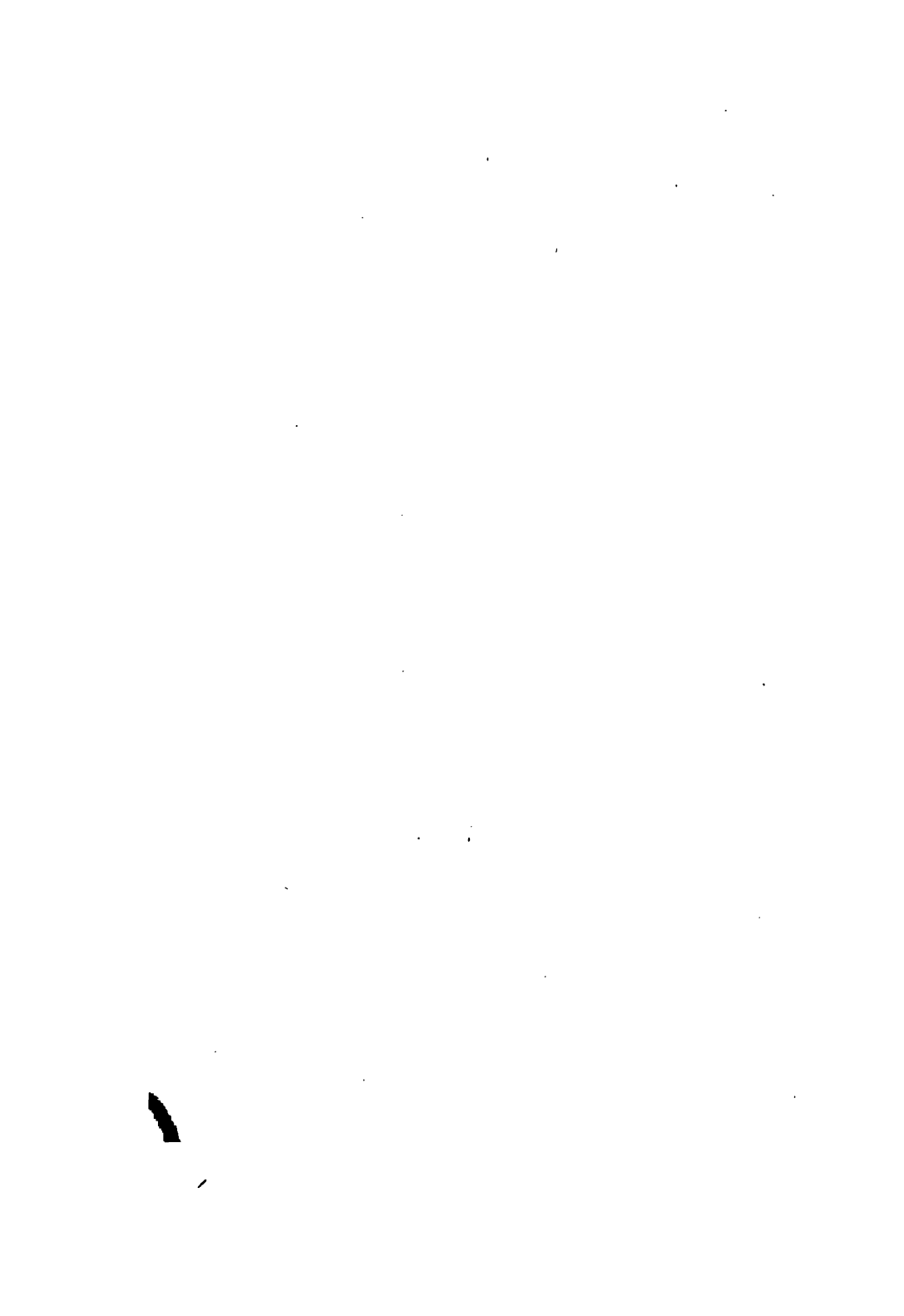
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GRAINGER'S THORN.

BOOK I.

A TURN OF FORTUNE'S WHEEL.

CHAPTER I.—THE VERNONS.

ONE morning, about the end of June, 1865, Sidney Vernon and Lionel Harding, two young Englishmen, were seated in a chamber in the Byculla Hotel, Bombay. The first-named was writing a letter, while the other smoked a cheroot, and from time to time addressed a few words to a native 'bearer,' who was packing a couple of large travelling trunks under his directions.

They were both good-looking young fellows, though in different styles. Tall and slim, with a graceful carriage, regular features, blue eyes, and soft brown hair, Vernon would have struck a beholder—especially a female one—as ‘nice;’ while Harding, larger of frame and stouter of limb, with irregular features so squarely cut as to appear somewhat heavy, dark flashing eyes, black curly hair, and a complexion swarthy by nature as well as from effects of climate, would have been spoken of as a ‘fine-looking man.’ Presently, when they began to talk, the same kind of difference might have been seen in their smiles. Vernon’s was that of a thoughtless, superficial, easily-moved nature; while Harding’s, though thoroughly good-natured, unmistakably indicated a self-consciousness of such mental and physical power and resoluteness of will, as justified him in taking smilingly not only the pleasant things of life, but many of those

that to weaker characters were among its smaller miseries.

‘Finished?’ he asked, as Vernon put down his pen and lay back in his chair.

‘No; but I mean to have a “peg” and a rest before going any further. The mere handling of the pen is a fatiguing exertion in this climate, not to speak of the labours of composition, when you want to say a disagreeable thing agreeably. I would certainly have liked to have got a little nearer to the Governor. Generalships before going back,’ he resumed with a light laugh, when he had ordered the bearer to bring the glass of brandy which was to serve him as the mid-day ‘peg,’ in which Europeans in India generally indulge; ‘but all the same I shall be jolly glad to get away from here; won’t you, Lal?’

‘Not specially so,’ answered Harding, in an off-handed tone. ‘I’m afraid it will

be some time before I get as well-paid an engagement in England as the one I've just completed here has been, and that's the main consideration with me.'

'Well, even making money here is a case of killing yourself to live,' said Vernon, 'and that's a thing I don't believe in.'

'No, more do I; but then, you see, when you have to make your own living, you often have to practise things you don't believe in; not, however, that I look upon a few years in India as at all a killing affair.'

'Well, seeing that at the present moment the glass stands at ninety-four in the shade, you can scarcely feel it at all a pleasant affair. But, at any rate, we *are* going back to England, and the question is, are you coming to our place to stay for a few weeks, when we get there?—you know you promised a while ago that you would.'


‘I know I did,’ answered Harding, with a smile, ‘but at that time I wasn’t aware that from your having thrown up your appointment, your own return would scarcely be regarded as a blessing.’

‘But what has that got to do with your coming?’

‘Why, if you are not altogether welcome, I, going there at such a time and on your sole invitation, might be regarded as more free than welcome.’

‘Oh, nonsense, Lal; our people are not of that feather: the women-kind, in particular, will be delighted to see you. They’ve written quite gushingly about you ever since I told them how you stuck to me when I was down with the fever.’

During the conversation he had been listlessly turning over a lot of papers in the drawer of his writing desk, and coming at this point upon a *carte-de-visite*, he exclaimed, as, after a careless glance at it, he held it towards his friend,—



‘Speaking of our women-kind, here is a portrait of my sister.’

For a passing moment Harding’s glance at it was as indifferent as Vernon’s had been, but the next instant his face became animated with an expression of admiration, and hastily blowing away the little cloud of cheroot smoke that hung around him, he fixed his eyes upon the likeness with a look of eager interest.

‘You see, as we are going by the mail steamer, we shall be there almost as soon as the letter,’ went on Vernon, who had not noticed the change in Harding’s manner. ‘Indeed, only we’re going to stay a few days in Paris, I dare say we should get home at the same time, so you had better let me say at once that you will be coming with me. Come, now, Lal, what do you say?’

‘Yes, I’ll go,’ he answered, without raising his eyes, and speaking in a half-musing tone. And then, as Vernon was


finishing his letter, Harding quietly slipped the portrait into his pocket-book.

* * * * *

In the opinion of the genteelly 'poor but proud' clique, calling itself the 'Society' of Stonebury, the Vernons were a family to be proud of, as a head to themselves; while those whom society chose to look upon as the vulgar herd were as decidedly of opinion that these same Vernons were a family such as it was a distinction for any town to be able to number among its residents.

George Clive Vernon, Esq., was only a solicitor, it was true, society admitted, but then they added he was no mere common six-and-eight-penny lawyer. His business was a conveyancing one, and consisted almost exclusively in the management of the legal affairs of the county families, with whom he frequently associated, not only in a business, but also in a friendly, way. The Vernons were themselves of a good

Stoneyshire family, so that even those of the county gentry who stood upon the conventionalities, had sufficient self and general justification, for asking Clive Vernon to join the autumn and winter gatherings at their country houses. Indeed, in this respect he suffered from an embarrassment of riches. Handsome, well dressing, polished, self-possessed, a good shot, one of the boldest riding members of the Stoneyshire hunt, clever beyond the average at whist, billiards, private theatricals, and the other indoor amusements with which bored, or weather-bound, visitors try to kill time; with plenty of tact in things social, and considerable powers of light, ready conversation—with all these qualifications, he was counted a guest that well became a great country-house gathering, and was much sought after in that capacity. There were some in Stonebury who said that he 'gave way to that sort of thing a great deal



more than was good for his business ;' but these cavillers, it need scarcely be said, were people with a tendency to vulgarity of soul. The 'society' clique looked upon his habitual association with the county families as one of the chief features of his greatness, and felt a sort of reflected glory whenever they saw his name figuring among the 'select circles' which the local papers were in the habit of informing their readers the county nobility were entertaining at their 'ancestral seats.'

With his business, which had been in the family for more than a century, he had inherited a 'personalty' of nearly twenty thousand pounds, and the mansion in which he lived. An old mansion, but • furnished with all modern appliances ; and with its noble suites of rooms, great picture-gallery, and extensive and finely laid out garden grounds, completely putting into the shade even the most pretentious of the modern villas, in which the rank


and file of Stonebury 'society' made their abodes.

He had married young and for love, and society had said at the time, married foolishly. With his good looks, good birth, and good prospects, society decided he ought to have made a good—that was a rich—match ; while his wife, though handsome, accomplished, and of good family, had come to him a penniless bride. She had been dependent, too, so much so that society was exercised as to whether her claims to gentility had not lapsed by reason of such dependence. When he met her she was living on a footing that was a combination of salaried companion and poor relation in the household of the titled county family, of which she was a connection ; and many a time had society seen her seated in the family carriage in charge of 'my lady's' shawls, packages, and lap dog, just as an ordinary hired attendant might have been. And, indeed,


the only real difference between her position and that of a common attendant's was that she received less pay than would have been given to the latter, and was more sensitive to the want of womanly consideration with which she was treated, a want of consideration which, when she she was no longer subjected to it, she was wont to attribute to the fact of there having been two exceedingly plain daughters in the family, who, though eager to marry, and by courtesy styled marriageable, were unable to gain even a distant prospect of a husband.

Still she *was* of gentle blood, and in marrying a Vernon, who, though at that time only an assistant to his father, was destined in the natural course of things to be *the* Vernon, she became a 'somebody,' and so, upon reflection, society decided that it might patronize her, without derogation to itself. But when she came among them society found that they had


reckoned without their host in the matter. When they attempted to patronize her she snubbed them, snubbed them so ruthlessly and indiscriminatingly, that sundry of the Stoneburyites who hung upon the verge, but were not admitted within the circle of society, maliciously whispered that she was taking it out of her would-be patronizers, for the snubbings she had herself endured in the days of her poor-relation servitude. Even when society, changing its tone, would have been conciliatory, she was haughtily cold and indifferent; and when, on the death of her husband's father, she became mistress of the Vernon mansion, she patronized society. She mixed but little, and that condescendingly, with them in a general way; took the head as of right in any semi-public matter in which she was associated with them, and gave parties upon a scale that made the pitiful pretentiousness of theirs painfully apparent even to themselves.




The son and daughter, of whose existence the reader has already been incidentally made aware, were the only children that had been born to these present heads of the Vernon family. Blanche Vernon, though she sought rather to avoid than aim at the character, was admittedly the belle of Stonebury; and beautiful, clever, affectionate, and much admired, was a daughter of whom her parents were justified in being very proud. If the generally fortune-favoured Clive Vernon was considered unfortunate in anything, it was his son. Not that he was exactly a bad son, or a bad man, or had ever done anything to disgrace his name. It was rather in what he had not done that his fault lay. He had declined to qualify himself for succeeding to his father's business, saying that he had no vocation for the law; that his natural instinct pointed to agriculture as his mission in life. At first the father had been inclined to insist upon his becoming a



solicitor, his want of instinct notwithstanding, but, in debating the matter within himself, he had come upon a train of thought that had induced him to yield. 'Why should not the Vernons,' he asked himself with a glow of pleasure, 'once more take a place among the *landed* county gentry? He had the fortune left by his father, which, if he chose to bestir himself, and look about him, he could make to bring in far greater rates of interest than it was doing in the old-fashioned stocks, in which it was then invested. His profession was bringing him in an income very considerably in excess of that required for his current expenditure, and when he no longer cared about carrying on the business himself, he could sell the reversion of it for a good round sum. With these realized and realizable means, and his special opportunities for knowing when advantageous purchases of county property could be made, might he not fairly hope



to get together a fair and goodly Vernon estate?' With this idea taking firmer and firmer hold upon his mind, he soon came to look favourably upon his son's alleged natural predilection for agricultural pursuits, and placed him as a sort of articulated pupil with a celebrated scientific farmer. But before many months had elapsed young Vernon announced that practice had unmistakably revealed to him that his 'call' to agriculture had been a false one; that farming was, of all things, the one least suited to him, and the army the only sphere in which taste and talent alike specially fitted him to shine. His deduction from this revelation was, that a commission should be bought for him, but against that proposition his father determinedly hardened his heart. The idea of raising his family into the ranks of the landed gentry still remained with him, and, as a conveyancer, he had had ample experience of the fact that a son in a crack



regiment was a personage much more likely to contribute to the dissipation than the acquisition of an estate.


Under these circumstances the son remained 'on hand' for about twelve months, at the end of which period he intimated that he had discovered, even without the aid of practical experience, that his military, like his agricultural, predilection had been a misleading and merely passing one; that for him to have entered the army at the time he had wanted would have been a mistake, as he found that the true and permanent bent of his mind was toward diplomacy, in which, as a profession, he was anxious to make a start, however humble, feeling confident that, with his foot once on the ladder, he would soon be able to ascend to a height that would distinguish him above the crowd. By the influence of his father's aristocratic clients a government situation was procured for him; but in a few months he was fain to

confess that the department in which he had been placed was not one in which he was likely to achieve greatness, or indeed even give ordinary satisfaction as a subordinate; and the officials under whom he served heartily concurring in this view of the matter, he gave up the place.

Other government 'berths' were obtained for him, with a like result; and, as a last trial, an Indian appointment had been obtained for him. As he had been distinctly given to understand that this would be the last situation that would be got for him, as it was one in which even a moderate display of diligence and ability would lead to advancement, and as, moreover, it was well paid, and gave its holder a standing in society, his father, despite former experience, entertained sanguine hopes that he would keep it. But these hopes, though he is not as yet aware of it, are destined, as the reader has seen, to be disappointed.

In short, as will have been gathered from what has been said above, young Vernon had a very considerable spice of ne'er-do-well-ism in his character, and was much more likely to be a trouble to the family while a junior member of it, and 'run through' its means on becoming its head, than to do credit to it in the present, or enhance its importance in the future.


So, in respect to his son, Stonebury society expressed itself sorry for Clive Vernon. But then, on the other hand, they were of opinion that he was specially fortunate, to a more than compensating degree, in his daughter. She could, said society—though it would have been sorely puzzled to have given any tangible grounds for its assertions—marry either rank or wealth at will. She had, according to society, refused Lord St Kennels, who, if very old in years, was also of a very old family, and very rich. The Honourable Algernon Woodlands, said the same au-



thority, was perfectly infatuated about her, and, though he was more than slightly imbecile, and for the present living on a very small allowance, there was only one life of eighty standing between him and an earldom, with twelve thousand a year. Or, supposing she did not care for rank; or objected to it when coupled with doting old age or youthful imbecility, there was Mr Grainger, the great mine-owner and iron-merchant, anxious to become her suitor. Mr Grainger, who, if of 'low origin,' was certainly neither old nor idiotic; who, on the contrary, could scarcely as yet be classed as middle-aged, was strikingly clever, and (unless the class who interest themselves in their neighbours' business were altogether out in their calculations) was making at least thirty thousand a year.

All things considered, therefore, Clive Vernon was regarded by those who knew

him as a man whose lines had fallen in particularly pleasant places; a man who was to be envied, and who ought to be happy beyond the common lot. But any observant stranger seeing him for the first time, on the morning upon which our story finds him seated at breakfast with his wife and daughter, would scarcely have been of this opinion. They would have said that he certainly did not *look* a happy man. Nay, they would probably have gone beyond the mere negative, and have said that he appeared a decidedly unhappy one. His eyes were dull and heavy, there was a haggard look upon his face, and the absent, listless way in which he ate the few mouthfuls of food that under the persuasion of his wife he did take, showed an absorbing mental pre-occupation, as well as want of appetite. Sometimes, when in urging him to eat, his wife spoke rather suddenly, he, so to speak, came to himself, with a quick, nervous start, and for a



moment glanced round him as if scarcely certain of where he was. Altogether, his manner was much less that of a happy man than that of a man with 'something on his mind'—some carking, long-existing, ever-present care or fear, that was undermining health and spirits.

On this particular occasion Mrs Vernon also seems to have something on her mind, but her trouble has only come with the morning; and after exchanging a number of meaning glances with her daughter, she disburdens herself concerning it. It is that she has received her son's letter, announcing that he has given up his appointment, and will, with his friend Lionel Harding, be in Stonebury a few days later than the letter. Mother-like, she puts the matter as lightly and favourably as she can, but an angry flush comes over the father's face as he listens, and there is harshness and bitterness in his tone as he exclaims,—

‘Well, confound it! this is too bad; the way in which that fellow has thrown good chances to the winds is sinful.’

‘Well, it is annoying, I know, Clive,’ said the wife, in a deprecating tone; ‘but after all it’s not of material importance: Sidney isn’t dependent upon any appointment.’

‘He very soon may be, though,’ he answered sharply.


‘Oh, come, pa,’ said the daughter, ‘don’t speak rashly; you know you wouldn’t really think of breaking with him over a thing of this kind. It does show a want of stability upon his part, certainly, but still there is nothing disgraceful about it.’

‘I don’t speak of breaking with him, Blanche,—I had no such idea,’ the father answered. ‘What I mean is, that your brother is not really independent of any appointment. His so-called independence is really dependence—dependence upon

my being both able and willing to support him in idleness, while I live and leave him wealth when I die. But even granting that I had the will to do this by him, what security is there that I shall always have the power? In this age, of all others, wealth is fleeting, and the loss of it can fall on none more heavily than upon those who have been altogether dependent upon it, and who can neither work nor want.'

He paused, as if expecting some reply, but the wife threw the daughter a 'speaking' glance, which said in effect: 'You know how irritable and odd he has been of late, pray do not attempt to argue with him,—it will do no good.'

So neither of them made him any answer, and after a brief pause he resumed in the same tone—'As he would not qualify himself for the family business, he had no *right* to throw away the other chances of a career, or, at any rate, of a livelihood, that were provided for him.




His leaving this last appointment may turn out a serious matter, more serious than either he or you dream of, though, as far as he is concerned, it would serve him right if he come to want bread through it.'

'If you think it of so much importance that he should do something, you had better get Mr Grainger to find him a situation,' said the wife.

'Yes, for him to throw it up in a month or two, and discredit my recommendation with him, as he has done with other influential friends,' said the father, rising from the table; 'but, however, I must get to the office,—I have an early engagement there.'

When on his feet he seemed to rouse himself mentally, and by a strong effort shake off the outward signs of care. When he went out the expression of his face was not that which it had worn at the breakfast-table, not that which of late it had almost habitually worn when alone




with his family, but that which it wore when 'on guard' before society,—an expression in which to a superficial observer there was nothing strikingly at variance with society's belief that Clive Vernon was a man to be envied.

CHAPTER II.


PREPARED TO LOVE.

MISS VERNON was not a 'strong-minded' young lady, in any blue-stocking or Amazonian sense of the phrase, but she was a sensible, self-reliant, honest-hearted girl, who, though perfectly free and frank in manner, had, unlike most reigning belles, nothing of the flirt in her composition. She knew in a general way that her parents took it for granted that she would marry, and marry in a manner calculated to promote the family interests; but this as yet lay in the region of ideas. Her mind had never been troubled by any man-catching schemes, either of her own



or her parents' weaving. She had no desire for the reputation of a heart-breaker, and scorned the notion of trying to 'show her power,' by attempting to draw from friends of her own sex any portion of the homage legitimately due to them, or of even tacitly accepting such homage when voluntarily offered. She disliked a 'following,' and of all men else avoided 'danglers.' Though she had had more than one avowed lover, and admirers innumerable, whom the slightest encouragement from her would have converted into avowed lovers, she had, till within a short time of the opening of our story, walked in maiden meditation, fancy free. But during the last few months her fancy had often lightly turned, if not exactly to thoughts of love,—to thoughts that lay very much—more probably than she was herself aware of—in that direction.

Clive Vernon had of late years regarded his son with a considerable degree




of disfavour, and, as usually happens in such cases, the mother and daughter treated him with a special affection, intended to be compensatory to him. They could not see him as others saw him; could see no ne'er-do-well-ism in his character. Papa, they said to each other, was harsh with 'poor Sid'; and they blamed circumstances rather than 'poor Sid' for those occurrences, concerning which papa was so cross and unreasonable. His father looked upon him as a sinner, his mother and sister took him for a martyr, and, Sidney himself inclining to the latter view, the consequence was that his letters to his father were short and formal, while those to his mother and sister were long, confidential, and chatty. A common theme in his longer letters from India had been the praise of his friend Lionel Harding. Soon after he had got out he had told them how he had made the acquaintance of 'such a capital young fellow.' In sub-

sequent letters he had spoken of 'Lal' having 'put him up' to this or that 'move' as to the ways of the country. Of Lal saying this thing or doing that. 'Lal and I' having visited such and such places, or been to such and such parties together. Then after a lapse, during which two mails had arrived without bringing a letter, had come an epistle, telling how he had been stricken with the fever, and how Lal had nursed him through it. 'Talk about a friend that sticketh closer than a brother,' it said; 'Lal stuck to me closer than any number of brothers. Stuck to me to the neglect of his business and his own health; stuck to me night and day, and, as even the doctors say, was chiefly instrumental in pulling me through. And he treats it all as a matter of course, and when I want to thank him, laughs and makes light of it.' And in following letters Lal was again and again alluded to and quoted.

One result of all this had been that Blanche Vernon had come to think of Lionel Harding as of one personally known to her. She took an interest in his sayings and doings, and allowed her thoughts and imagination to dwell upon him—thought what a manly kind-hearted fellow he must be, ‘wondered’ what he was like, and whether they should ever meet. Though, compared with the kind of young ladies who speak of themselves, or delight to hear others speak of them, as ‘silly’ or ‘gushing’ young things, she seemed cold and formal; she had, nevertheless, like all women who have not as yet done battle with the world, a considerable amount of romance latent in her nature, and presently this romance found vent in heroising ‘Sid’s friend.’

The young men she had met had all been of one type, and that a characterless one. Some of them had been of noble

birth, and all of them well-bred and 'highly respectable.' Some had been rich, and all more or less 'eligible.' But none of them had had individuality,—the thing which to her thinking best became a man, and with which her fancy soon came to endow Lionel Harding. She had gathered from her brother's letters that he was a young man, who without any aid from patronage was pushing his way in the world; and her opinion, founded on the sayings and doings recorded of him, was that he was self-reliant, clever, and likely to be successful. And then, was not his behaviour in nursing Sid 'so noble?' At first her thoughts about him had been very vague and general; but soon a time had come when those thoughts grew to have a closer and warmer interest,—when her self-communings brought a pleasurable blush to her cheek,—when her thoughts dwelt upon him as the kind of man of



whom a woman might justly be proud, and her dreamy imaginings pictured him as a lover—her lover.

The news that he was about to visit her home sent a flutter to her heart, and for the first time brought her to thoroughly realize the nature of her inclinings regarding him. As this self-knowledge came home to her she smiled, and once more fell to 'wondering'—to wondering whether, under the test of actual meeting and daily association, she would find the hero of her day-dreams all that her fancy had painted him, or find herself disenchanted. She knew that such disenchantment was common enough, still she did not think it would result in the present instance, and certainly hoped it would not. She at least was prepared to welcome Harding warmly—perhaps even lovingly.

One point on which Blanche Vernon had sometimes 'wondered,' when thinking about Harding, was whether he might


ever have thought of her. Whether, if her brother had incidentally spoken to him about her, or when he had been conveying to him the epistolary 'kind regards' which her mother and she had been in the habit of sending to him, since the episode of the fever, he might have been led upon his part to 'wonder' what manner of girl she might be.

Being, as we have said, a sensible young lady, she did not think that such was likely to be the case. She knew that what was quite natural in a home-keeping girl was very improbable in a young man fighting his way in the world. Had she known that it was thinking of her that had alone induced him to consent to visit her father's home, and that since the moment he had consented, scarcely an hour had passed in which he had not thought of her, and looked longingly and impatiently forward to meeting her:—had she known this she would have been greatly

pleased, but still more greatly surprised. So far as her premises had gone, she had argued correctly from them; but what Sidney Vernon's frequent allusions to 'my sister,' or 'our Blanche,' and his due delivery of the kindly messages sent by her, had failed to do, in many months a single glance at her portrait had done in a moment. It showed him a maiden 'beautiful exceedingly,' a face of striking loveliness, and loveable as lovely. The sight of the 'counterfeit presentiment' brought an instantaneous wish to see the original, and caused him to close with Sidney Vernon's invitation. With his mind thus turned upon her, he remembered many of the little things that her brother had mentioned concerning her, and during the voyage he frequently contrived to make her the subject of conversation, and still more frequently she was the subject of his thoughts. And the life of the moment was highly favourable to those softer

thoughts of his. With a constitution seasoned to sea-voyaging, with nothing to do, all the luxurious ease of a P. & O. Steamer at command, and only the blue ocean around him, and the bluer sky above him,—under these lotus-eater-like circumstances, his sentimental musings grew with what they fed on. Grew, till they became so all-absorbing that he sometimes began to be almost afraid of them, and tried—but vainly—to divert their current. The beautiful face would force itself upon his imagination, and draw his thoughts back to itself.

Such a state of mind, he would argue with himself in a self-excusatory vein, was after all only natural under the circumstances; but still he knew that in a general way it would be regarded as foolishly romantic, that he would himself have so regarded it in another, and at times he was angry with himself. But though from a sense of shame, at what at such



moments he considered his weakness, he would have shaken himself free, he was too deeply under the spell to do so.

He, too, believed that he was spending all this thought on one, who, though she had heard his name and sent him conventional messages, had never bestowed a thought upon him. Still he was already in love with her, even before he had seen her, and felt a strong presentiment that their lives were destined to influence each other. And his presentiment was a true one, but, like most presentiments, it was vague. Could he but have seen *how* his life was destined to influence, not only hers, but also the lives of those belonging to her, he would have had good cause to shrink from the meeting to which he now looked forward with joyous eagerness.


When, about a week after the letter announcing his return, Sydney Vernon arrived at his father's house, he had no need to introduce his friend. His name

was upon the lips of the household, and kind words and smiling faces were waiting to welcome him. Father, mother, and daughter alike received him warmly, but it was naturally upon the daughter that his attention was chiefly fixed, and a glance was sufficient to show him that in beauty, at least, she was all that he had imagined her—all that he could have wished. The photograph that had in his case been, so to speak, the feather with which the love god had winged his arrow, had not flattered her. Indeed, it had scarcely done her justice. It had shown her graceful figure, her white round throat, softly rounded chin, small firm mouth, finely chiselled nose, pale high forehead, and masses of shining auburn hair. It showed, too, the half smiling, wholly charming expression that was habitual to her face when in repose; and that she had fine eyes. But it could not show—no portrait could have shown—the light that lay in the depths of those ‘orbs

of heavenly blue,' or the varied expressions that came into them, and, with an animating effect, flickered across her face when she spoke.

But the beauty-enhancing effects of the varying lights and shades of feeling, which the portrait necessarily failed to present, Harding saw in an instant. Though they were but slight, and of only momentary duration, he caught the sparkle that came into her eyes, and the flush that rose to her cheeks, as she shook hands with him: and, as he noticed them, he *felt* that there was a corresponding sparkle and flush in his own eyes and face; and that 'the fetters of delicious thrall' were tightening around him.


That Miss Vernon should, upon her part, regard Harding with special interest,—should be curious to note how far the man of real life was like the man of her thoughts, was but natural. Her first look at him, though perfectly 'well bred,' though having




nothing in the least approaching a 'stare' in it, was keenly scrutinising—and it was satisfactory. There was no disillusion; no anti-climax. He was manly of form, genial of manner, and his face, while indicating energy, intellect, and determination, was pleasant and open to look upon. Though unconscious of the similar signs in herself, she observed the heightened brightness in his eyes, and colour in his face. Neither, however, attributed these signs in the other to anything more pointed than the slight excitement, or possible touch of embarrassment, that might easily be supposed to be incidental to the circumstances of their meeting. But each did think that the first impression of the other, with respect to them, was favourable, and each was happy in the thought.

Harding was of what may be called a make-himself-at-home disposition. The sort of man who strikes up conversations in railway carriages,—makes travelling,

hotel, or holiday acquaintances freely,—is familiar upon the shortest acquaintance, exacts no ceremony towards himself, and is good humouredly disregarding of it towards others. Who, partly by nature, partly from practice, is a good conversationalist, has a fair modicum of wit, is as willing to take as to make a joke, and would rather hear a joke told at his own expense, or even tell it, than see a company dull; but who, under all their easy sociability, are, when essentials are in question, thoroughly self-respecting, and given, when need is, to promptly and pointedly demonstrating that such is the case. Those who do not 'take to' persons of this stamp are apt to look upon their manner and 'ways' as impertinent, but most people do take to them, and the Vernons, one and all, 'took to' Lionel Harding. Before the end of his first day under their roof, he was more at home among them—was felt by them to be more at home among



them—than many of those they had been in the habit of associating with for years. For his age (two and thirty) he had seen a deal of the world, and seen it observingly. He was an engineer, and had learned his profession as the articled pupil of a celebrated marine and general mechanical firm, by whom he was still employed. In their service he had been to sea long enough to get a chief engineer's certificate, and he had been to France, Spain, Germany, Russia, and India, as well as to many parts of Britain, to superintend the erection of machinery. In following the latter phase of his business, he had acquired a more than merely general knowledge of the extent, position, and prospects of many mining, iron works' and water works' companies; and a man with such knowledge as this, and shrewdness to turn it to profitable account, by judicious speculation (as it incidentally came out Harding had done), was an especially welcome guest to




Clive Vernon, who, of late years, and particularly since the commencement of the limited liability era, had speculated largely.

So Clive Vernon was at home with him as a man of the world, and a man of business,—a kind of man that it was a rarity for him to meet, the stamp not obtaining in Stonebury.

Mrs Vernon felt at home with him, as Sidney's much-talked-of friend, and Miss Vernon on that ground, and others, already adverted to.

Under these circumstances the conversation soon fell into a strain of friendly familiarity, and much of it naturally turned upon Sidney's proceedings while in India. In discussing them Miss Vernon made such frequent incidental allusions to—showed that she had so fully and admiringly noted and sympathetically remembered—the manner in which Harding had been mixed up in some of them, that at length the possibility of his having occasionally




occupied a favourable place in her thoughts, suggested itself to him. She must have taken more than a passing notice of what had been said of him. Might she not in so doing have come to entertain a friendly feeling for her brother's friend? Nay, might she not even have come to entertain a more than friendly feeling for him? Might not the brother's pen-and-ink sketches—telling more in many ways than mere portraiture of feature could have done—have had something of the same effect upon her that the photograph of herself had had upon him? It was a pleasant train of supposition, and its conclusion sent a thrill of pleasure through his frame.

But as usually happens when the wish is father to the thought, hope was soon followed by a reaction of doubt. Hope told a flattering tale, and then came doubt suggesting that it *was* flattering—more flattering than truthful. But after all, said doubt, Miss Vernon's remembering the de-

tails of her brother's letter was nothing remarkable. Her incidental allusions, founded on that remembrance, were *fairly* incidental in themselves, and there was nothing pointed or significant in the manner in which they were made, and they might mean nothing of what hope had whispered.

But if he was left in doubt, as to whether Miss Vernon might have ever been led to think of him in a more than friendly spirit, it was not long before he left her very little room for doubt as to his having so thought of her. Nature inclined him to be a bold and impulsive wooer, and the accidents of conversation afforded him an opportunity for strongly hinting at, if not explicitly telling, his love. In the evening he was in the drawing-room with Miss Vernon and her brother. The latter placed himself at the piano, and turning over a pile of music, sometimes played, sometimes asked questions as to what



some of his friends had been doing since he had been abroad. Miss Vernon was seated on a couch, and Harding in a chair close beside it, and while Sidney played, they carried on a low-toned conversation. In the course of this somewhat disjointed talk, the lady happened to remark,—‘ You know, Mr Harding, we don’t look upon you as a stranger. We had come to think of you as a friend, even before we ever thought we should see you ; and after we knew you were coming to see us, we looked forward to your arrival, with almost as much pleasure as we did to Sidney’s—indeed, almost as if you had been another brother. But there, I suppose you don’t believe in anything so sentimental as that,’ she concluded, seeing him smile.

‘ If my looks say that,’ he answered, ‘ they interpret my thoughts very badly. Such feelings may be sentimental, but I think they are natural. I was smiling to think *how much* I believed in them—how

little, as a stranger, I had come to regard you before I had seen you. Your face seemed as familiar to me as your brother's. I knew you in a moment; would have known you anywhere, or under any circumstances.'

'By Sidney, I suppose?'

'And by this,' he answered, taking her portrait from his breast-pocket, and showing it to her.

'That's one I sent to Sidney,' she said, in a half-questioning, half-surprised tone.

'Yes; he lent it to me to look at, and I kept it,' he answered.

Her face flushed as he spoke, but before she could say anything further her brother had got to the end of the piece he had been running over, and turning to her asked when she had last seen a friend of his whom he named.

'Oh, I forgot to tell you! He is married,' she said, making no direct reply to his question.

'Married!' he echoed, in surprise.

‘Why, I never heard of his being in danger of anything of that kind.’

‘The danger, as you affect to consider it, arose suddenly,’ she answered. ‘He saw, and courted, and married within a month. It was a severe case of love at first sight on both sides, I believe.’

‘No, not on his side,’ said the brother, in a bantering tone; ‘he is two or three and thirty, and love at first sight is a juvenile complaint with males,—ranks with the measles, and that sort of thing, or, at any rate, is innocuous after they come of age, eh, Lal?’


It struck Harding that there was a curious, even an anxious interest in the look with which Miss Vernon regarded him when he was thus drawn into the conversation, and there was undoubtedly a meaning emphasis in his tone, as he answered,

‘Well, no, I can’t go with you there, Sid. To say that a man is not liable to

love at first sight, is to put him down as one lacking much of the "better part of man,"—as a man incapable of distinguishing beauty, or feeling its influence. I believe in love at first sight, and even more in love before first sight; love, so to speak, by premonition.'

'Oh, that is over my head, Lal,' said the other, laughing. 'Is it philosophy, or metaphysics, or spiritualism, or what?'

'Well, if I had to describe it in high-sounding terms, I would say that it was a compound of idealism and sentiment, but as a matter of fact it is, I think, a very simple idea. What I mean is, that from such things as hearing a person spoken of, or seeing their portrait, you may come to feel in love with them—with the character you form of them from what you hear, or the face that comes to haunt you, as the faces of portraits sometimes do. Such cases are exceptional—'



‘Very, I should imagine,’ Sidney laughingly interrupted; ‘the portrait part I can understand; that is a kind of love at first sight; but the doctrine of love by hearsay strikes me as much too superfine for general comprehension; however, I’ll admit the possibility of it.’

He commenced playing again as he spoke, and nothing further was said.

Blanche Vernon fully understood the significance of Harding’s language; knew with what purpose he had given the conversation the strained turn he had done; and, upon the whole, the knowledge was pleasing to her. But, at the same time, it brought a vague sense of trouble, and a feeling of embarrassment, that kept her silent. While Harding, fearing that he had already spoken with an unwise boldness, and labouring under a reactionary timidity, was also silent, and dared not even raise his eyes to her face to try and read there how his words had been received.

* * * * *

‘Well, Lal, was your reception suggestive of your being more free than welcome?’ asked young Vernon, as they were about to retire to rest on the following night.

‘No. It was in the freely welcome style,’ answered Harding.

‘Of course it was. You might have been sure, even from what you know of this member of the family, that they wouldn’t visit the sins of the son upon the visitor,’ said Vernon, touching himself on the breast as he spoke. ‘Indeed, I may confide to you that they have already confided to me—my mother and Blanche, you know—that they find you “delightful,” I think was the word,—at any rate, find you a capital fellow.’

‘Well, I can only hope they believe in first impressions,’ said Harding with a smile.

‘Yes, and later ones too,’ added Vernon,

‘for I told them that the longer they knew you the more delightful they would find you.’

Harding made no direct answer to this, but, after a short silence, he asked in a hesitating tone, and with a slight flush mounting to his cheeks as he spoke, ‘Is your sister engaged, Sid?’

‘Why do you ask that?’ said Vernon, with a rather significant smile.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ answered Harding, still showing slight signs of confusion, ‘only—, well, you know young ladies very often are engaged.’

‘Well, Blanche isn’t, Lal; but you mustn’t go falling in love with her, for all that, or rather you mustn’t go getting her to fall in love with you.’

‘How is that, Sid?’ asked Harding, who had recovered his composure, and now spoke with just a suspicion of combative self-assertion in his tone.

‘Well, Lal,’ answered Vernon, ‘if we

were talking seriously, I would say because you are poor. You are clever, and likely enough to be rich in time, but, in the mean time, you *are* poor; and poverty,—no matter how well combined, whether you are poor but honest, poor but well born, poor but clever, or poor but anything else,—should be accepted as a barrier to love in certain quarters, and the quarter we are speaking of is one such. I know what you are thinking !'


His last exclamation was elicited by his noticing a smile stealing over his friend's face.

'What?' asked Harding.

'Why, that I'm talking with a good deal more worldly wisdom than I generally act.'

'Yes, something of that kind.'

'Well, perhaps I am; for one thing, it's so much easier to talk than do; and for another, I begin to think it's much easier to be worldly wise over other people's



affairs than your own. However, what I've been saying just now is to the point. My father is a man of one idea—to raise us Vernons in the social scale; and as I have, I suppose, proved more or less, or rather more *than* less, of a failure in that regard, he now looks to Blanche, to her marrying either some noble of high degree, or some mighty man of money. So you see it wouldn't do for you and her to be falling in love; it would lead to stony-hearted parent work, and other disagreeable things of that kind.'

'There's not much danger of her falling in love with me, if she goes for the Excelsior Vernon principle,' said Harding.


'Well, I don't know whether she would go for it, if it didn't go with her feelings. Under such circumstances, I'm inclined to think she'd be likely to turn out strong-minded, and that's why I say, don't go getting her to fall in love with you.'

'She is a girl of whose love any man

might feel proud,' said Harding, in a half musing strain.

'That she is, though I say it,' said Vernon; 'but, however, this is all talk, though, at the same time, Lal, I haven't talked it without some little idea of purpose. To tell you the truth, I thought I detected symptoms of love at first sight, both upon your part and Blanche's, and so, believing I saw danger, I thought it best to signal breakers a-head. And now I'll say good-night.'

'Good-night,' returned Harding, without making any reply to these last observations. Then he went up to his own room, and seating himself on the edge of the bed, fell to pondering upon his love. He could see breakers plainly enough. Could see that Clive Vernon was wealthy and ambitious,—that he looked upon himself as something more than a merely professional man; and would expect any




suitor for his daughter's hand to have either rank or riches—neither of which he had to offer. He was the son of a provincial school-master, who made no pretensions to 'birth,' or 'good family,' and who as the proprietor of a third-rate boarding-school had to work very hard, to make out a decent livelihood. He was himself as yet in no fixed position, and was not likely to be so for some time to come. Out of his pay and the profits of some fortunate speculations he had saved a few thousands, with which, when he had added a little more to them, he purposed commencing business on his own account. But then it would be years before such a business could be looked upon as fairly established,—before an income derived from it could be regarded as moderately certain; and then there was the chance of its not succeeding at all. Looking at all this, was it not sheer folly of him to think of Miss Vernon at all,

—even supposing that he was justified in believing that she was favourably disposed towards him?

But presently his musings took a somewhat more cheerful tone.

If he saw the breakers he saw also the glorious prize beyond them. He knew that 'love will find a way,' that many a time it had found a way through far more formidable breakers than those that stood between him and his earthly paradise. And what others had done, he said to himself, he at any rate could attempt to do—and he would, boldly and perseveringly. As he formed the resolution, he took Blanche Vernon's portrait from his pocket-book, and kissed it. Yes, though he had turned thirty, had seen much of the world, and was generally spoken of as 'hard-headed,' he kissed the senseless paper, as any love-sick boy might have done. For, after the grave, love is the greatest of all levellers, and Lionel Harding was



very much in love with Blanche Vernon.

For hours he lay awake thinking of her, and when at length he fell asleep he dreamt of her, but even in his dreams the course of his love did not run smoothly.


Yes, both sleeping and waking, he could see breakers a-head. But as yet he had no knowledge of a sunken rock, more dangerous than all the visible breakers, which also lay between him and the haven of love. Such a rock, however, there was in the person of the Mr Grainger incidentally mentioned in the preceding chapter.

CHAPTER III.

THE GREAT MR GRAINGER.

MR GRAINGER, though only an occasional visitor to Stonebury, was one of its most admired notabilities—a greater notability in many respects than even Clive Vernon. A few in the town were personally acquainted with him, and were regarded by less fortunate individuals as enviable on that account. Many knew him by sight, and ‘everybody’ by reputation; for was he not the Cræsus of Stoneyshire, and did not the Stoneburyites—their gentility notwithstanding—worship the golden calf?


‘After all, though, you can’t class him



with the county families,' some of the more hypercritical of them would say, when discussing the subject of his wealth and local influence.

'Well, no; but he could buy up any of them,' the more enthusiastic admirers of money would make answer; and the hypercritical ones, being unable to deny this proposition, were fain to admit, as a necessary corollary, that he must be a great, good, and distinguished man,—a man to worship, and thank Providence for; even though, genteelly speaking, he had neither blood nor breed. But if he was not blue-blooded he was strong-blooded, and if he lacked breed in a heraldic sense he did not in a physical,—the sense in which he valued it most highly. Standing five feet ten, erect of gait, firm of tread, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, large-limbed, large-headed, and strong-jawed, you could see at a glance that he was a man of great physique. A man whose 'presence' and


mere weight of bone and muscle would serve him well in the battle of life; whose robust health, and the animal spirits and capability of enduring fatigue, consequent upon it, would greatly aid the vigour of mind and determination of character, which the conformation of his massive head, the glitter of his dark, penetrating eyes, and firmness about the mouth and lower part of the face, generally showed him to possess. His prizefighter-like physique had probably stood him in much better stead than breed, as understood by society, would have done. He was, in the stock phraseology of the day, a 'self-made' and 'self-educated' man, and though his rise to wealth and position had been comparatively rapid, it had not been the result of any single 'stroke of luck.' He had worked to achieve it,—worked continuously, and very hard; but thanks to his muscular constitution, the wear and tear of the race for wealth had



not brought upon him the premature old age it brings upon so many. With form unbowed, face unwrinkled, eyes undimmed, and hair unblanched, he did not look his forty-five years, and he still retained such a fund of animal health and spirits, as made work come lightly to him, and enabled him to take life pleasantly, and enjoy the good things that his wealth put within his reach.

Ten years before the opening of our story, he had been a working collier ; now he was the potentate of the large tract of the county, forming part of the black country—the owner or leaseholder of most of its greatest mines, forges, and workshops. The sole proprietor of a number of loop railways, connecting his mines with main lines ; and so large a shareholder in, and active and submitted-to director of, a system of company lines, having its terminus in Stonebury, as to be little less than a proprietor of it also.

He was the Richard Grainger, Esq., of Grainger Lodge, whose name was so much before the public as a chairman and director of companies. The Richard Grainger, Esq., after whom 'the Grainger Sinking,'—the finest, best-yielding coal-pit in all Stoneyshire,—was named, and to whom it belonged. He had sunk its shaft on ground of which he held a lease at a mere waste-land rental—had sunk it against the advice of experts; had, holding fast to reasonings and conclusions of his own, continued to sink it far beyond the depth at which coal had always previously been found in the district, and, despite apparent demonstrations of non-success, had sunk down and down until he had at last come to the coal. He had offices in Paris, London, Liverpool, and Manchester; but he preferred keeping his chief offices—a quite 'palatial pile'—in the immediate neighbourhood of his mines and workshops. From his private room in these offices he



had telegraph wires laid on direct to all his agencies; and seated in that room, with a confidential, a shorthand, and a telegraph clerk as his assistants, he directed operations in all parts of the country. His business consisted chiefly in large dealings with leading coal and iron merchants, and contracts with steam navigation companies, and the government. In connection with the last phase of it, his name had once, for a passing nine days, been prominently before parliament and the public. It had been alleged that he had obtained an extensive and specially profitable admiralty contract, by means of rampant bribery of officials, and inquiry, debate, and newspaper leaders had ensued. But that which economically inclined M.P.s, or those who represented other mining districts, or spoke as the mouthpieces of disappointed contractors, called bribery, by the name of 'customary percentage' did not sound so harshly; and after much


talk—a great deal of which had nothing to do with the subject in hand—‘the matter was allowed to drop.’ In the existing state of commercial morality (or immorality) Mr Grainger rather benefited by this affair than otherwise. It was a fine advertisement for his business, and placed him before the world as a pushing man, ‘a man to get on in the world, sir;’ nor did government contracts fall away from him.

Altogether Mr Grainger was a man of mark, and, so far as Stoneyshire was concerned, was certainly a power in the land. He might have been member of parliament for Stonebury had it so minded him. ‘A numerously-signed requisition,’ asking him to stand for the borough, had been presented to him; but he had declined, saying, in his formal answer, that his business avocations did not leave him that time to devote to parliamentary duties which he considered was due to the im-

portance of the borough. But his real ground of refusal had been that the wire-pullers, who had got up the requisition, had intimated to him that if he acceded to its request it would be necessary for him to put down a certain number of thousands. Whereupon Mr Grainger, who, when he became emphatic, generally also became slangy in his discourse, replied that he would see them at the deuce before he would do anything of the kind,—that if they had calculated upon using the lance upon him they were greatly mistaken; he was not to be bled in that style; that the thing offered was not worth anything like the money asked for it; that he could ‘work’ the influence of half a dozen members of parliament with that sum.

On the discovery of the Californian gold-fields, he had, in company with some other working colliers of an adventurous disposition, gone out to the diggings. In three years he had come back worth three


thousand pounds, a sum which those who had been his fellow-workers in the Stoneyshire mines looked upon as quite a fortune. But when on congratulating him they gave expression to that view, he replied that he had not made a fortune, that he was only just about to commence to do that; that *he* did not consider three thousand pounds a fortune, but only the *makings* of one. Within a month of his return he had taken a lease of a coal pit, in the working of which he showed an energy and enterprise that speedily resulted in largely developing its resources and enhancing its profits. As time went on, and opportunity offered, he took other pits—ironstone as well as coal-pits—and he started furnaces and forges, and erected a large engineering establishment. He worked up a trading connection with the same energy and success with which he superintended the working of his mines. It was not, however, until the time of the



Crimean war that he had an opportunity of showing himself in all his greatness. When war was declared, and government wanted a rapid delivery of large quantities of coal, he entered into contracts with them to an extent which it was said he would never be able to carry out. But those who said this, though they might know the yielding powers of his pits, did not know the capabilities of the man. He had managed to obtain intelligence of the declaration of war some hours before it was made public, and in those few hours had contrived to get a number of smaller colliery proprietors to sign contracts binding them to deliver their coals to him at the market price of that day. Before the war was over he had realized a very large sum, the greater part of which he had invested in developing the railway system of Stoneyshire, and making himself, so to speak, the railway king of the shire.

When the joint stock mania had set in

he had again come prominently to the fore, and it was in this last connection that Clive Vernon had come to know him. Their acquaintance had at first been a merely business one,—Vernon being solicitor to one of the several companies of which Grainger was a managing director. But one day when Grainger was in Stonebury on business, he had accepted an invitation from Vernon to lunch with him, and then he had seen, and at once fallen in love with, Blanche Vernon. From that time the slight acquaintance between the men had rapidly ripened into a friendly intimacy, and Grainger became a frequent visitor to the Vernon mansion, and at each visit fell more deeply under the spell of the beauty of the daughter of the house. In his instance, at any rate, society in Stonebury had stumbled upon the truth. He was in love with, and ardently desirous of winning, Blanche Vernon, but, as often happens in such cases, the lookers-on saw



most of the game. Mr Grainger had never told his love; and Blanche had never for a moment dreamt of such a love existing.

Being a prosperous man, and one who had risen, Mr Grainger had of course enemies and ill-wishers as well as admirers, and some of these did not hesitate to say that much of his success was owing to practices that were more sharp than honourable. In organizing and carrying out such practices, he was, according to the enemies, greatly aided and prompted by Stephen Barber, a factotum who acted as his private secretary, chief agent, and solicitor, and was invested with certain discretionary powers for transacting business in the absence of his chief. This personage had, said the enemies of his employer, been a pettifogging lawyer in London when Mr Grainger had picked him up, and, finding him, in many respects, a kindred spirit, had brought him to Stonebury and made him his 'right-hand man;' or rather, to

speaking strictly according to those who delighted to pick holes in Mr Grainger's character, Barber had made himself his employer's right-hand man—and something more. Had not only wormed himself into his business until he had become necessary to it, but had likewise gained a certain moral (or immoral) ascendancy over him. And even Mr Grainger's friends admitted that the great man tolerated contradiction and scarcely-disguised sneering from Barber, to an extent that was rather surprising in a man of his generally imperious character.

Barber was about Grainger's own age, and of what is usually called gentlemanly appearance,—a furtiveness in the expression of his eyes, and a hard cynicism underlying the blandness in that of his face, not striking you until you observed him closely.

'You won't be back for three or four days, then?' This Stephen Barber observed to Mr Grainger one day, about two months



after young Vernon had returned from India.

‘No, nor for longer than that,’ answered Mr Grainger, who was about to start for London, and had been giving Barber business instructions.

‘I shall leave town in three or four days,’ he went on, as he noticed a slight elevation of the other’s eyebrows; ‘but I’m thinking of coming through Stonebury back, and staying at Vernon’s for a few days; I want to see him.’

‘Yes, and to see his daughter, too,’ he added, replying this time to a half smile of Barber’s, as he had before done to the elevation of his eyebrows.

‘Does he know that it’s to see his daughter, too, that you go?’ asked Barber, with the half smile still on his face.

‘I take it that he has a general idea that it is so. He’s a very good fellow in his way, but still I should hardly think he fancied himself so strongly as to imagine

that it's solely for sake of his society that I stick in with him as I do.'

'Does the young lady herself know that she is the attraction?'

'She doesn't know the special light in which she is the attraction.'


'You haven't told her, then?'

'I haven't so much as directly hinted at it yet.'

'Ah, well, I suppose being in love does really change a man,' said Barber, the smile on his face broadening. 'Most people, now, would have set you down as certain to be a bold type of wooer.'

'I daresay I shall be bold enough when the time for boldness comes,' answered Grainger, with just a shade of irritation in his tone; 'but there is a difference between being bold and being rash; and what may be only boldness after a while, would have been rashness hitherto. I know exactly how I stand.'

'Oh, of course,' answered Barber, 'I



merely meant that your general character is suggestive of your acting with boldness and decision in any matter.'

'Look here, Barber,' Mr Grainger replied, suddenly rising, and beginning to pace the apartment, 'I know there's a sneer under that smile of yours. You think I'm a fool.'

Mr Barber protested against this by a look which seemed to say that even if he had a heart for sneering framed, he ne'er could sneer at his employer, and that the possibility of the great Mr Grainger, the 'hard headed,' 'shrewd,' 'practical,' *successful* Mr Grainger acting foolishly in anything was a thing undreamt of in his philosophy.


'Oh yes, you do, though,' the other hurried on, as the look was about to be followed up by spoken words, 'and I don't blame you; it is folly to be speaking as I am doing now, but I can't help it, for all that.'

Mr Barber met this by another look, which might have been interpreted as saying that since Mr Grainger himself admitted it, why, his conduct at the present moment had perhaps a touch of folly in it; but that still he should not disparage himself too much on that account, or be afraid that it detracted from his general character for hard-headedness, since

‘To be wise and love
Is hardly granted to the gods above.’

And great as he (Grainger) undoubtedly was, he was not quite superhuman.

‘I know,’ Grainger resumed, ‘most people would laugh at the idea of me being in love in such an extent as to make me talk about it in this style. If a man sticks hard to business, and pushes on in the world, and doesn’t make the conventional fuss about the dollish kind of women he mostly meets, he is put down as being incapable of loving. People seem to argue



that if you are not wooden-headed you must be wooden-hearted. Why, the love of a lot of milk-soppy boys is not worthy of the name, compared with the love that I can feel that I *do* feel for Vernon's daughter.'


'Oh, I can quite understand a strong-willed man loving strongly,' said Barber; 'but that only makes me the more surprised that she should not have found out the state of your feelings towards her, even without being told. Are you quite sure she hasn't?'

'Quite. She would have shown it if she had. She is neither a flirt or a husband angler. If she was either, I wouldn't care for her as I do. It isn't her beauty alone that has so drawn me to her. I've been in the company of equally beautiful girls without caring a rush about them, unless it was to get away from their prattle. But there's character, and sense, and *heart* in her. She could love.'

‘ Well, from the little I’ve seen of her, I can quite understand that, too,’ said Barber; ‘but still, as the play says,

“ She is a woman, therefore may be woo’d ;
She is a woman, therefore may be won.” ’

‘ Oh yes! there’s nothing of the unapproachable about her. I am wooing her, and I mean to win her, but the time to speak out hasn’t come yet. I may be a fool in speaking as I am doing, or in being in love at all, but my foolishness does not go beyond that. If I suffer from love sickness I don’t from love blindness. As I said just now, I know exactly how I stand in the matter. So far, all the *love* is on my side; but she *likes* me, likes me far more than she does any other man she has ever been thrown into contact with. She knows I’ve got something in me, and she has brain enough to care for a man on that account; and, as the strongest feeling she has for any man is for me, I have no doubt I shall



be able to cultivate that feeling till, almost unconsciously to herself, it develops into love. Things are progressing well in that direction now, and when the time for bold wooing comes, you may depend upon it I shall be a bold wooer. I think I may say for myself, that want of boldness is not one of my failings, and the prospect of winning her would make a coward bold, as it would make a bold man cautious.'

Barber made no immediate remark in reply to these observations, and after a brief pause Mr Grainger went on :

' You had made out the general situation in this matter for yourself, and I haven't said much that you didn't know before,—otherwise I daresay I should have held my tongue; but, as it was, I felt that, whatever you might think of it, I must speak. Hang it, when a man's mind is full of a thing, it's only natural that he should want to speak of it.'

' Even if it's to one who takes no in-

terest in it, I suppose you think,' said Barber, still with that half-amused, half-deferential smile that had characterized his manner throughout the conversation.


'I wouldn't think far wrong if I did think so,' answered Grainger.

'You would, though,' said Barber. 'I *do* take an interest in the subject, and that's why I asked the question or two I did just now.'

'I'm rather surprised at that,' said Grainger sneeringly. 'I don't see your reason for taking an interest in it.'

'Well, I don't see myself what I'm to gain by taking an interest in it,—for that I suppose is what you mean,' said the other laughingly; 'but there's no rule without an exception, you know, and for once even I might feel an interest that wasn't simply a selfish one.'

'And what sort of an interest might yours be when it isn't a simply selfish one?'



‘Well, in the present instance, it’s simply the interest of watching a comedy, or it may be a drama, or melodrama, or even a tragedy in real life. For where there’s love and rivalry there’s no saying what the play may turn out to be; and unless I’m greatly mistaken, you’ll find when you get to Vernon’s this next time that you’ve got a formidable rival near your throne.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Grainger sharply.

‘Well, perhaps you were too modest in putting it so; but, as I understood you, you *did* put it that much of your hope of winning Miss Vernon lies in the circumstance of the gilded youth who flutter about her being what you call such a milk-soppy lot.’

‘Well?’

‘Well, suppose she had a suitor who was *not* milk-soppy—who, on the contrary, was a clever, pushing young fellow, and a

handsome one too, and one moreover that she likes, or more than likes—supposing all that; what then?’

‘Then it would be bad for some one concerned, and I don’t think the some one would be me; and unless she was foolish I don’t think it would be her. However, there’s been enough of this silly fencing—what are you driving at?’

‘Only to forewarn you of such a rival, in order that you might forearm yourself for the contest.’

‘But who told you this?’

‘No one. I saw it for myself when I was at Vernon’s last week about the drawing up of the renewed leases. I saw the man; saw that he had come and seen, and been conquered, and in turn had conquered, for, if I am any judge of such matters, the only difference between the two is that he is in love and knows it, while she is in love without as yet understanding the exact nature of her feelings.’

‘ And who and what is he ? ’

‘ Well, his name is Harding, and he is an engineer, in the employ of Parker and Sons, the great marine and general engineers, for whom he goes abroad a good deal to superintend the erection of their machinery, or watch their interests where they guarantee its working. He made the acquaintance of young Vernon in India, and that gentleman, who has come home on his father’s hands again, invited him to their place, where when I saw him he seemed quite at home, though at that time he had only been there a few weeks. Seeing that he was smitten over Miss Vernon, and at the same time knowing your sentiments towards her, I naturally took stock of how things were going; and you may depend upon it they stand substantially as I have said. My opinion is, that you’ll have to now declare your love, or be for ever silent. Judging by the progress the new comer has already made,

matters are likely to very soon reach a stage at which there will be no room left for you to speak, — much less win the lady.'

While Barber had been speaking an angry flush had crept over Mr Grainger's face, and there was an angry haste and emphasis as he answered,—

'But I will win her or—or—'

'Or perish in the attempt,' put in Barber, as the other paused, less from want of comparison than from rising passion.

'I'll do it anyway,' Grainger answered, now speaking more slowly and sullenly. 'I've never yet set my mind on a thing but what I've accomplished it sooner or later, and I've set my heart as well as my mind on this. I will win her, come what may, and when I once say I *will* do a thing, it's not one man that will prevent me from carrying it out.'

'Well, no; in a general way it wouldn't be one man or a good many men that

would prevent you from effecting any purpose upon which you had fully resolved; but then general rules—your general rules—will hardly apply in a matter of this kind. The *I will* principle is a grand one applied to material obstacles; it works wonders in the way of business, or the crushing of a rival trader; but it can't control hearts—even though it may break them. Seeking to mould or crush human passions, and especially the passion of love, the *I will* principle is worse than useless, it is certain to prove a thorn in the flesh to those acting upon it.'

Barber's tone and manner were those of a person who, under a partly real, partly assumed guise of playfulness, seeks to give unpalatable but well-meant advice, in a quarter where they have reason to fear resentment.

But Mr Grainger, who knew his right-hand man's nature, detected the assumption of superiority, and the shade of con-

temptuous scorn that underlay the outward manner; and his tone became almost threatening as, rising from his seat, he coarsely answered,—

‘Well, there, that’ll do, any way. We’ve had enough of fine talk. It just comes to this,—you think I’m a fool in this matter, and perhaps I think there’s a pair of us. However, we’ll see; but of this you may be certain,—if my “I will” does prove a thorn in the flesh, it will prove a worse one to those it acts upon than to me acting upon it. And now I must go. I’ll drop you a line when I get to Vernon’s, and then if my signature is wanted, or anything pressing has turned up, you can send Wilkinson down about it.’

‘Very well,’ answered Barber, and then without another word Mr Grainger took his departure

As soon as he was gone Barber rose from his seat, and planting his shoulders



against the mantle-piece smiled in a decidedly sardonic fashion; and as he smiled he mused; and his musings ran in this fashion:—

‘ Well, by Jove, it may be well said that truth is stranger than fiction. If any one was to tell this scene as a story against Grainger, no one would believe it. Of course, one shouldn’t be surprised at the love-fever striking anywhere, or at any strangeness of behaviour in those smitten; still it does require an effort to imagine love as one of *his* weaknesses; though I hardly think, even now, that it is his greatest weakness. It wasn’t so much the prospect of losing her as of another man being able to win her, that fairly roused the devil within him. However, it is roused, and it will be bad for some one,—for himself, I think. She’s not a girl to be lightly turned; and if there is anything in faces, he’ll catch a tartar in that Harding. But, as he says himself, we

shall see, and I shall watch pretty closely to see what I shall see; for somehow I have an instinctive notion that this will prove a case of dire events, from amorous causes springing.'

CHAPTER IV.

A PROVISIONAL ENGAGEMENT.


‘ Pretty Polly, if you love me, do say yes,
Do say yes, do say yes,
Pretty Polly, if you love me, do say yes,
Do say yes.’

THE person who gave vent to the above snatch of music-hall melody was Mr Richard Wilkinson, clerk to Mr Grainger,—commonly known among his personal friends as ‘Lion’ Wilkinson, a name bestowed upon him in consideration of his being the ‘Lion Comique’ of ‘The Black Country Brilliants,’ an amateur concert troupe who went about the black country towns and villages, airing their vanity

(and incapacity) whenever a subscription for sufferers by a colliery explosion, or anything else of that kind, enabled them to use charity as a cloak for the particular sin of music-murdering.

He stood in the doorway of a room which served as a kind of wardrobe room to the ladies of the Vernon family, and the person to whom his song was addressed was Miss Polly Mansell, Miss Vernon's maid, who was at that moment the only occupant of that apartment.

Mr Wilkinson was a slim, 'genteelly-built,' pleasant-faced young fellow of about five-and-twenty. He wore a very shiny hat with a very low crown and very curly brim, a coat with very little tail and a great deal of pocket and binding, tight-fitting trousers, and boots very much over-ornamented with buttons and patent leather. Altogether his appearance was unquestionably loud, though, at the same time, there was nothing raffish about it.



Polly Mansell was not genteelly built. Though she was only eighteen her figure exhibited a decided inclination to the 'buxom;' but as she was over middle height, she carried her plumpness off well, and showed round, firm, and graceful. She had a clear skin, nicely blended complexion, soft dimpled cheeks, a small rosy mouth, and dark blue eyes that sparkled with health and easy good-humour, which, it could be seen at a glance, was part of her nature. Her well-fitting, short-sleeved dress displayed her figure to advantage, and the little lace cap fastened to her rippling brown hair was so coquettish in itself, and so coquettishly worn, as to be solely ornamental in its effect. Altogether she was a very pretty and attractive girl in the Hebe style of prettiness—quite pretty enough to account for the genuine admiration that mingled with Mr Wilkinson's jesting manner.

'Well, Mr Impudence, what brings you

here?' she said with a smile, when Mr Wilkinson had got to the end of his musical salutation.

'The usual cause, Polly,' he answered, taking off his hat and advancing into the room as he spoke,—'a combination of business and love. Business brings me into the house, and love brings me prowling about, to get a chance of seeing you by yourself. Some of these times I shall be getting dropped on, and taken up on charge of being concealed on the premises with intent, et cetera. Then, my lady, you would have to come forward and claim me as your sweetheart, and give me a good character.'

'Oh no, I wouldn't,' she answered, laughingly. 'The character would be all that you want; and your master could give you that.'

'Well, yes,' answered Wilkinson; 'and he ought to be able to do it feelingly too. It's a case of like master like man, for

it's a good deal more love than business that draws him here.'

'Do you think he really is in love with Miss Blanche?'

'Do you think there's any room for thinking about it?'

'Well, that depends, Mr Wilkinson,' she said, with a shake of her head. 'You know there's love, and love. I've known fellows who, when they have found that the girls that they loved—or supposed they loved—didn't love them, have just gone and found another girl who did.'

'If she be not fair to me,
What care I how fair she be?'

sang Mr Wilkinson.

'And I've known others,' went on Polly, not heeding the interruption, 'who, when they have found out the same thing, have taken it dreadfully to heart.'

'Ah, those are the ones I can sympathize with!' exclaimed Mr Wilkinson.

‘I’m one of that sort. If you don’t take pity on me I shall pine away. Remember there’s

“No rest but the grave for the pilgrim of love.”

‘Bother your singing and nonsense,’ said Polly, with womanly impatience at being interrupted in the current of her talk; ‘you are always at it.’

‘Well, I can’t help it, Polly. It is my nature to,—the same as it is for me to be in love with you; though, so far as that goes, I suppose it’s the nature of a good many to be that.’

‘Well, if I was vain, I would say you might suppose less likely things than that,’ she answered, with a coquettish smile and shake of the head; ‘but, at any rate, I’m not going to be quizzed, so you may as well let me say what I was going to. I know that it’s because of our young missis that your master comes here so much; there’s no room for thinking about that.

But then he is not engaged to her, or anything of that sort; and what I meant was, do you think he is that way in love with her that he would feel cut up if he found that she didn't love him—that she loved some one else ?'


'Well, yes; in the last case I am sure he would feel it. That would be tramping on him exactly where his shoe pinches; he'd feel it very much, and so, I fancy, would "some one else," before all was over. They say that rivalry gives a flavour to love—to the successful party, I suppose they mean—and in a general way I dare say it does. But, for all that, I would rather not be the successful rival of my governor; he'd make the flavour preciously bitter, I'd lay odds. Tender-heartedness isn't exactly one of his weak points, but going on the "death or glory" principle whenever he is opposed, is. He'd easily get over not winning her, but not over any one else winning her away from

him. But why do you ask your question?'

'Because I think things are just how I put them in the question. Up to now it's only been the gentleman in love with her, but now there is a young gentleman staying here that I fancy she's as fond of as he is of her.'

'And you think it's going to be a match with them?'

'No, I don't say that; as far as I can pick up, he is poor. But then I know what sort of a one she is; they may persuade her not to make a match they don't like, but they won't persuade her to make one she doesn't like. And so if she can't make a match with this Mr Harding, she won't with anybody else; not even your master. I can see how things are: her father and mother would like her to have Grainger, and they try to fill her head with him; but they can't,—much less her heart, for all their talk about his money,



and his being self-made, and all the rest of it.'

'Well, there's no mistake about his being self-made,' said Wilkinson; 'very much self-made. So that he makes himself, he doesn't care who he breaks; and between you and me, Polly, it strikes me that if he was to find himself crossed about Miss Vernon, he'd break her people.'

'I dare say he'd be spiteful enough to try, but her people ain't to be so easily broken as that comes to.'

'Well, you know, Polly, I wouldn't like to see them broken, if it was only for your sake; but at the same time, I don't think it would be so hard to break them as you suppose. I happen to know that Mr Vernon has been speculating in companies, and I have an idea, that, like a good many more, he has speculated, not wisely but too largely. And if he *has* got a weak joint in his armour, my governor would be just the man to find it out, if it was his cue to do so.'


‘Oh, he’s a wonderful fellow, I dare say!’ exclaimed Polly, tossing her head; ‘but for all that, you may take my word for it, that if he was to ask my young missis to have, he’d get no for an answer.’

‘Ah, but you know, Polly, there are people who won’t take no for an answer, and he’s one of them.’

‘Yes, and there are people who won’t give yes for an answer, where they’ve once said no, and meant it. And now you had better go.’

‘Well, I suppose I shall be getting dropped upon if I don’t,’ he answered; and then, after a few words of half-bantering, half-serious love-making, they separated.

Polly Mansell, being a lady’s-maid, a sharp-witted girl, and a belle in her degree, naturally took a warm—and, as she was fond of her mistress, a friendly—interest in everything in the nature of a love affair that related to Miss Vernon.



She noted all such matters observingly, and her deductions from what she had seen and heard, were perfectly accurate. Blanche's parents *would* have liked her to take Mr Grainger for a husband. When, on his coming to see the state of Mr Grainger's feeling towards his daughter, Clive Vernon had expressed himself to that effect, his wife had been inclined to scout it.

‘He was such a very common person,’ she said; ‘of such low origin, and so well known by every one in the county to be of low origin.’

‘Well, yes, all that was true enough,’ the husband had answered; ‘but, after all, those drawbacks were merely conventional matters—matters of individual taste; while his commendatory qualities were of the most substantial order; he was very rich, very influential, very clever, very successful,—a thorough man of the day; a man that plenty of the county people

would like to have for their daughters, his low origin notwithstanding. That was the practical view of the case,—the view that was generally taken now-a-days' — and after a time, Mrs Vernon came round to it.

Blanche, however, knew nothing of her parents' hopes in this respect; but her ignorance of them was more in favour of their possible realization, than a knowledge of them would have been. Had she been aware of such matrimonial speculations, she would have been cold with Mr Grainger; as it was, she rather encouraged his attentions than otherwise,—was proud of them,—proud that a man of his marked ability and strength of character should take an evident pleasure in her society, and show that he knew her to be capable of taking an interest in something higher than the last new thing in bonnets or local scandal. But all this was in a purely friendly spirit; and Mr Grainger, as he had explained to his 'right hand

man,' was conscious that such was the case. So he had bided his time, and wrought to ripen friendly liking into maidenly love.

Hitherto he had laboured and waited hopefully, never doubting of ultimate success; but now the chief ground of his hope—her heart-wholeness—was struck from under him. This Harding had come and won her love, as others could see more plainly than she could herself; for, having an uneasy consciousness of the breakers a-head, she would at times attempt to persuade herself that it was rather friendship and gratitude than love that she felt. There had been no declaration of love, no avowed love-making between them.

Shrinking from the obstacles that they knew would beset them if they attempted to enter upon the beaten track of love, they sunk themselves in a fools' paradise of present happiness,—of a love that needed

no verbal assurances,—that spoke in ‘a world of sighs,’—in eyes that looked love to eyes that spoke again,—in sentimental music, gently played or hummed in the soft gloaming of the summer evening,—and pretty sentimentalities—vaguely general as they met the ear, but having a world of special meaning to hearts placed *en rapport* by love—whispered during moonlight rambles in the summer nights.

Harding had at first only intended to stay a week, but, on the Vernons pressing him to prolong his visit, he had gladly consented to do so, and had arranged with his employers to have leave of absence until the first of three steam vessels of a peculiar construction that they were building for abroad, was ready, when he was to go out with it, deliver it, and instruct those who were to run it in the management of its engines. This, he had calculated, would give him another eight or nine weeks’ holiday, and as the end of that time ap-

proached he began to feel very miserable. Upon the day on which Polly Mansell and her admirer had held their discourse, his feelings of unhappiness reached a climax, as on that morning he received a letter, requesting him to join the ship three days later.

The morning letters were delivered at the Vernon mansion just about the breakfast hour, and the custom of the household was for each person's letters to be laid beside their plate on the table; and Blanche noticed the troubled look that came over Harding's face as he read his on this morning. Later in the day they met in the garden, and, as he was unwontedly silent and abstracted, she at length observed,

'I'm afraid your letter to-day brought ill news.'

'Its being good or bad news depends upon circumstances,' he answered, with a forced smile; 'but in any case it is unpleasant in its immediate effects.'

She made no reply, and after a minute's silence he resumed,—

‘It was a letter of recall. I must leave here to-morrow, or next day at latest.’

There was another embarrassing pause, and, feeling herself called upon to say something, she remarked,—

‘But you were expecting to be sent for about this time, were not you?’

They had turned into a leafy alley, along which they slowly sauntered side by side, but with some little space between them; and Harding was looking straight before him, and spoke in a tone that was more one of half-bitter musing than direct reply, as he answered,

‘The awakening is none the less painful because I knew it must come.’

‘The awakening!’ she echoed faintly.

‘Yes, the awakening, Miss Vernon,’ he exclaimed impetuously, and stepping to her side and looking into her face as he spoke. ‘The awakening from a day dream,

the intense happiness of which has so wrought itself into my heart and brain, that by contrast with it the real life of the future will always seem unhappy, and little worth living for.'

Her eyes drooped, and the colour rushed to her cheeks; but when the excess of his own agitation brought him to a stop at this point, she spoke no word, and after a few moments' silence he broke out again.

'Miss Vernon, it may be wrong—it may be unfair to you, but I must speak. You know what I mean; you must have seen that I loved you. I do love you with all the strength with which it is given to the heart of man to love;—as a man only loves once. I shall never again see a sweet face such as I might have looked upon with thoughts of love, but what your sweeter face will come between, and keep me from it. I saw the difficulties that lay in the way of any happy termination of my love for you, but with all the

hopefulness of love I thought they could be overcome. More, I even dared to dream that you could be brought to love me,—that in some small degree you did love me. It was a presumptuous dream, I know, but, as I have said, it was a very blissful one, and, now that the awakening has come, I can neither help feeling nor speaking of my unhappiness.'

Again he was brought to a pause by his own vehemence, but still she remained silent, and after a brief space he resumed :—

'I have no doubt you acted in goodness of heart in being as kind about me as you have been, but you would have been doing me a truer kindness had you been cold instead of kind with me. You might have known yourself well enough to have been aware that a love for you was not one to be thrown off at will, and as you could not love me, you should not have let me gone on loving. Had you made me understand at first, as you might easily

have done, that such a love must be hopeless, I might have gone away then, and have mastered my passion, but now it has mastered me—and I'm miserable.'

He turned away as he finished speaking, and something very like a sob burst from him. She raised her head quickly at the sound, and though his face was averted, she could see that he was greatly moved. For a few seconds, during which her own face gave evidence of a strong conflict of feelings, she gazed at him in silence, and then lightly laying her hand on his arm, and looking up into his face, as on feeling her touch he turned round, she faintly uttered, 'But, Lionel, I did love you,—I do.'

While the words were yet upon her lips he had drawn her to his breast, and was passionately murmuring incoherent protestations of love and happiness. Then came a few minutes of voiceless unspeakable happiness, at the end of which she coyly raised her head, and partly with-

drew from his embrace, but still leaving him with his arm around her waist, as they began to saunter on again.

‘And so you were going to take an injured tone, and put me down as one of the cruel?’ she said presently, with an arch smile.

‘Well, you see, the unhappy are often unjust,’ he said; ‘and I *was* unhappy, Blanche, at the thought of being parted from you, never to see you again, perhaps; of having to think of you as lost to me, of your becoming another’s.’

‘But you said you had thought I did love you.’

‘Well, I had; but when I was telling you that I was called away, and you never said a word, I began to think I was mistaken.’

‘My not saying a word—that is, the word you wanted me to say—was your fault. You gave me no fair chance to speak it. You spoke of being miserable,

and put cases of "if," but you never asked the simple question. I've just been thinking that many a chance of happiness may have been missed through gentlemen trying to learn their fate by throwing out feelers, instead of putting the direct "to be or not to be."

'I hope you don't think of such a gentleman that—

"He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
That dares not put it to the touch
To gain or lose it all."

'Well, now it is put that way, I do think there is something in that, though it was the other side of the question that I was thinking about. As long as there can be any possible doubt as to whether the matter is really "put to the touch" it is dangerous for a woman to "say a word." She may be willing to bless, and yet afraid to speak.'

'Well, I don't know, Blanche. Where

mutual love is I think you can always feel your way to a mutual understanding and avowal of it. You see we did.'

'Well, you looked so very miserable and reproachful, that I could not help pitying you.'

'No, nor yet seeing that I *did* love you, eh, darling?' he said, clasping her to his breast again, and kissing her passionately as he spoke, and for some blissful minutes they once more stood thus in a silence of ecstatic happiness.

During all this time of joy-imparting confession and light-hearted lovers' chat they had been all in all to each other, thinking only of their love,—nought of the obstacles by which it was surrounded. But such intensity of feeling as can 'daff the world aside and bid it pass' can be but transitory, and presently the remembrance of the everyday world, with its common-places and littlenesses, its social, conven-

tional, and 'practical' requirements, and Mrs Grundy-isms, forced itself back upon them, and as the thought of it rushed in upon her Blanche Vernon released herself from her lover's embrace, and looking up into his face with a scared expression on her own, said,

'Oh, Lionel, I'm afraid I have acted very foolishly. I had better for both our sakes have let you go even misjudging me than have spoken as I have.'


'Do you regret having so spoken, then?' he asked softly.

'Not so far as my own feelings are concerned, but—'

'Then you have not spoken foolishly. You have spoken nobly and wisely. I know what you mean. There are other things beside your feelings to be consulted,—the wish of your parents and the opinions of the world in which they and you live, and which would say that I was a bad match for you.'

‘What our little world—which in an affair of this kind would mean merely the gossiping women in it—might say would be a matter of indifference to me,’ she said with a disdainful toss of the head; ‘it was solely about my parents that I was thinking. I would not under any circumstances enter into any engagement or correspondence that was to be kept a secret from them; if it came to so evil a choice, I would rather defy than deceive them.’

‘I would not wish you to do either, Blanche,’ he said. ‘With your permission—which, from what you say, I take it for granted I have—I will speak to your father before I am an hour older, and as to the rest, why, I have no fear. I have some little capital, some little skill in my profession, some little ambition, and it will be a hard thing if with these and the higher motive, and hope that you have given me, I can’t establish myself in such a position



as will justify me even in the eyes of the world in asking you to be my wife.'

As he finished speaking they emerged from the foliage-screened walk and came in sight of the house, to which they returned, and Harding whispering, 'Wish me success, Blanche,' immediately went in search of her father.

He found him alone in the library; and being heart-full of his subject, came to it with a rather abrupt bluntness:—

'Mr Vernon,' he said, 'I wish to speak to you on a matter that is very near to you and very, very dear to me. I have come to ask you that I may be permitted to correspond with Miss Vernon after I am gone from here.'

'To correspond with Miss Vernon!' the other echoed, looking at him with a rather puzzled air; 'on what footing?'

'As being provisionally engaged to her,' answered Harding, after some stammering and hesitation.


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‘And what may you mean by *provisionally* engaged?’

‘Engaged subject to everything being done aboveboard, and to my being able within a reasonable time to make such a position for myself as would justify me in asking a young lady who had been brought up as Miss Vernon has to be my wife.’

‘Does Miss Vernon know of this?’

‘She does, sir—I speak with her consent. From the first moment I saw her I loved her, and so long as I could be near her, that in itself was a sufficient happiness. But when this morning I was brought face to face with the necessity of being separated from her I felt utterly miserable, and in my misery I told my love. To my inexpressible delight, I found that it was not altogether hopeless; and therefore, sir, though it may be presumptuous for me to mention it, I would ask you to consider that her happiness as well as mine may be involved in this.’



While Harding had been speaking Mr Vernon's face had continued to cloud, but with his expression there seemed to be mingled a something of fear, and his voice was a little shakey as well as harsh as he answered,

‘Mr Harding, you surprise me, and to be candid with you, my surprise is of anything but an agreeable character. Without intending any special disparagement to you, I must say that I thought my daughter had a more worthy appreciation of what was due to herself and her family than to have acted as she appears to have done. But for having thought so, I might have suspected this and prevented it. I had far other views for her, views which though not as yet fully unfolded to her, were progressing favourably, and that I still hope to see carried out, despite any romantic folly that you may have put into her mind. Whether or not you have made a fair use of your opportunities under this

roof you will probably consider a matter of taste, but clearly understand this, I shall forbid anything in the nature of an engagement between my daughter and you; and if she were to marry against my will she would go to her husband a penniless bride.'

He would have spoken further, but Harding interrupted him:

'Mr Vernon,' he said, 'your anger makes you unjust. I am no heiress-hunter, and no thought as to whether Miss Vernon would be a dowered or a penniless bride had ever entered my mind. As I said, I do not wish to ask her to be my wife until I am in a position that entitles me to do so. Such a position I believe I can make, and her love is all the wealth I desire with her. If you will only consent to what I have already asked I will say, in God's name, keep your money so far as I am concerned.'


'Well, well,' said the other, beginning

to pass the room with an agitated step, 'perhaps I am unjust, for I am sorely troubled. But in any case, I must refuse your request. More than you can imagine depends upon the plan that it would overthrow. You have not been long here altogether,—your feelings cannot be very deeply involved, and I beg as a favour—I will put it on that ground—that you will go away without seeking to see Blanche again or attempting to hold any communication with her after you are gone ;—it will be best for all parties interested for you to do so.'

'Feeling in a matter of this kind is not a mere question of time, Mr Vernon,' answered Harding, 'and my feelings *are* deeply involved. Still, whatever I might suffer by it, I would do what you wish if I thought it *would* be best for all interested ; but I do not feel that such would be the case. As I take it, the plans you speak of are based more upon con-

siderations of wealth and position than of feelings; but while admitting the practical importance of those considerations, I think Miss Vernon's happiness should over-ride them, and if her feelings assure her—I speak with all due diffidence—that she would be happier with me than with any other man, however wealthy or high-placed he might be. If this is the case, would it be for the best for her that we should be separated, as you wish ?’

‘Look here, Mr Harding,’ answered the other, ‘I have discussed the subject at this length with you instead of dismissing it at a word solely out of regard for my daughter's happiness. I know her to have a strong will and strong feelings. If it seemed to her that my commands had anything selfish or unjust in them she might rebel against them, or if she obeyed them merely as a matter of obedience the effort might leave her very heart-sore. To avoid anything of this kind as far as may



be, I will compromise with you. I altogether object to her marrying you. I believe the match that her mother and I have in view for her will be a better one for her. I know that it will be a better one for her family, and I shall use every fair means to bring it about. On the other hand, if you will promise neither to entangle her nor allow her to entangle herself in any definite engagement, or any arrangement whatever that would make it even an implied point of honour upon her part not to engage herself to another man, if you will promise that, and to hold no communication with her for six months after you go away, I will agree to your having a private parting with her, I will undertake that there shall be no *unfair* pressure put upon her; and if at the end of the six months I find that, as you put it, her feelings lead her to believe that she can be happier with you than any other man, I will consent to your provisional engagement. If you will


agree to this, well and good; if you will not, I have only to say that I will use my authority to the utmost, even to the extent, if necessary, of leaving her no choice between breaking with you or breaking with her family. Do you agree?’

‘Yes. The terms are hard upon me, but the alternative would be harder upon her, so—’

‘Let us consider it settled,’ interrupted Mr Vernon in a tone of dismissal; and Harding, taking the hint, withdrew.

When he had gone Mr Vernon sank into a seat, and his face became terribly haggard as he muttered to himself, ‘I risked nothing by that arrangement; in less than six months there must be a change of some sort.’

He fell into a moody silence for some minutes, and then suddenly rising to his feet, as if trying to shake himself free from his thoughts, said aloud, ‘Well, the worst can but come, and I know what that is—for myself.’




CHAPTER V.

MR GRAINGER IS ROUSED.

MR GRAINGER, as will have been gathered from the conversation between his clerk and Polly Mansell, had duly carried out his intention of visiting the Vernons. Made specially watchful by what Stephen Barber had said to him, he soon came to a pretty accurate understanding of how matters were going between Harding and Blanche, and what he saw confirmed and intensified the hatred which he had already begun to feel towards Harding even before seeing him. With this feeling, and jealousy as well as love firing him, he felt almost mad with pas-

sion, and mentally swore to himself, with a bitter oath, that he *would* have the girl, come what might; and Harding's manner towards him when they came fairly into contact still further determined him, if that were possible, in his resolve.

From hearing him spoken about in the Vernon household Harding, on his side, had made a tolerably correct guess as to the estimation in which Mr Grainger was held in the family, and his prime motive in visiting it. He had heard of his wealth, his ability, the honour that was paid to him, and had felt how formidable to all his hopes of winning Blanche the rivalry of such a man might be. He had not, therefore, been predisposed to regard him favourably; but it was only as a rival that he thought of him with dislike—until they met. Then he speedily came to dislike him as a man also, though not with anything like the rancorous bitterness with which the other looked upon him.




Indeed, upon the whole there was, perhaps, more of an undefined fear than of mere dislike in the impression which Mr Grainger made upon him. He could see the evil spirit of over-weening self-will within him, and could easily surmise how devilishly relentless and unscrupulous such a man could be, if he found himself opposed upon any matter on the compassing of which he had set his heart.

Grainger had arrived at the Vernon mansion three days before the one on which the occurrences described in the previous chapter had taken place, and whenever in that interval Harding and he had come together they had naturally jarred. He sought to 'put down' Harding, and in his attempts to do so was overbearing, dictatorial, almost openly insulting. But Harding, in whose vague fear there was certainly no shade of the personal, turned the tables upon him. He was cooler, more ready-witted, quicker at

repartee, and spoke, and especially contradicted, with an easy self-assurance and assumption of authority, that was—and was intended to be—thoroughly galling. So far as there was any putting down, it was he who put down Grainger, and this added fuel to the other's hate.

So much was this the case, that when only the men of the family were present Grainger scarcely attempted to conceal his feeling; and on the evening of the day on which Harding had avowed his love it so fell out that even the slight restraint of a host's presence was removed. Sidney Vernon had gone out for the day, and just before the dinner hour a message had come from the father, saying that he would not be able to dine at home. When, therefore, the ladies left the table, their visitors were for the first time left alone with each other. Harding, who was elated by even the modified degree of success that had attended the declaration



of his love, was disposed to make friends ; and, following up a topic on which Grainger had been speaking to Mrs Vernon, asked in a tone of friendly inquiry,—

‘ Will this Mr Gibson’s having started these new forges be likely to have a prejudicial effect upon your interests, Mr Grainger ? ’

‘ No ; it will be likely to have a prejudicial effect upon his,’ was the answer, spoken in a sneering tone.

‘ Then he’d better not have started them,’ said Harding, laughing.

‘ Much better,’ the other answered. ‘ I’ll spoil his pitch for him, as we used to say in the diggings, as I would spoil anybody’s, if it interfered with *any* plan of mine.’

Though he spoke under the cover of a generality, his tone unmistakeably conveyed a challenge, the intended personal application of which was sufficiently

pointed by the defiant glance he cast upon Harding, who, dropping his tone of careless good-humour, answered,—


‘Well, it’s in the nature of individual plans to cross each other sometimes; but I think it’s a very dog-in-the-manger-ish proceeding for the person who finds he cannot carry out his plan to attempt to spoil the pitch, as you put it, of the more successful man.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Well, I suppose that’s a matter of taste, or, as some people might say, of want of taste; and anyway, you know, there are people who might object to having their pitch spoilt.’

‘So much the worse for them, then.’

‘Perhaps so, if they get the worst of it; but he must be a poor wretch who wouldn’t defend his pitch, not to speak of pitch-spoiling being a game that two can play at. There is such a thing as a person going out to shear, and getting shorn.’



‘I’ll chance all about that in the matter I’m thinking of,’ answered Grainger, with a savageness of tone and look, that showed his passion was reaching the uncontrollable point.

Harding, who seemed rather non-plussed by the other’s sudden adoption of the strictly personal form of speech, made no immediate answer, whereupon the other burst out—

‘Oh, you know well enough what I’m driving at.’

‘Possibly I do,’ answered Harding, after another moment’s hesitation; ‘but I’d rather continue to speak of pitch-spoiling; and all that I have now to say on that is this,—If another man fairly wins what I as well as he may have desired I bear him no malice,—I *don’t* act upon the dog-in-the-manger principle; but if another man—well, to stick to the text—if another man spoilt my pitch, or even attempted to spoil it, by trickery or


treachery, I would bear malice, and it would go hard but what I would find some way to hunt him down for it. Those are my views,' he concluded, rising from the table as he spoke; 'you have stated yours, and now we had better join the ladies.'

'And how did Grainger and you get on together by yourselves?' asked Sidney Vernon, when later in the same night Harding and he were chatting together.

'Not very well,' Harding answered; 'in fact, we fought—under cover.'

'How under cover?'

'Well, he spoke about what he calls spoiling the pitch of any one whose action might interfere with any plan of his, and I suggested that there were people who would not stand quietly by and see their pitch spoilt, and that I for one would go in for reprisals if one of mine were unfairly spoilt.'



‘ Well, I tell you candidly, Lal, you’ve made an enemy that I wouldn’t like to have.’

‘ He came ready made, Sid, and so far made that merely to have allowed him to be the Sir Oracle of the table-talk would not have disarmed him. At the same time I don’t like him as an enemy any more than you would. Not that I fear him for myself, but I do fear that he may bring trouble on others in trying to strike me through them.’

Vernon made no immediate reply, and after a rather lengthy pause, during which he appeared lost in thought, Harding resumed :—

‘ Look here, Sid, I won’t fence under cover with you. What you foreboded has come to pass,—there has been love-making between your sister and me.’

Then he told him of how he had given voice to his love and of the interview with the father. Coming back to Grainger, he went on :—

‘Of course, Sid, he was the party your father had in view, and no one could be more fully aware than I am that in many respects he would be an infinitely better match than me; but these particular respects are ones that your sister will regard as altogether secondary to the question of her own feelings, which will not be in his favour beyond the point of friendship. However, there can be little doubt but that he will propose to her, and—in my opinion—no doubt at all that she will refuse him. If she does he will blame me for it, will think that I will triumph over it; and to be revenged upon me, he may resort to some trickery to win her. I’m not melodramatic in my notions in a general way, but at dinner-time he intimated as much as that he *would* have her, and it’s no libel upon him to say that he is more clever than scrupulous, and more combatively self-willed than either. In a word, Sid, as I said just now, I fear

him for the sake of others, and I want you to promise me, if you will, that you'll watch over your sister, and should occasion arise, guard her against any force or scheming in this matter.'

'Well, Lal, I can quite understand our people preferring Grainger as a suitor, and, to tell you the truth, I would have preferred him myself—on grounds of wealth and position, you know—but still there are none of us, I hope, such inveterate match-makers as to wish to *force* Blanche's choice. As to scheming, I should stand but a poor chance against Grainger, if it came to that. I'm sorry you and he should have crossed each other. In fact, Lal—excuse me saying it—I'm sorry now that you should have come here at all,—your coming, like everything else bearing on the family that I have a leading hand in, seems likely to bring trouble.'

'Well, at moments, Sid, I almost wish I hadn't come myself; but wishing is use-

less now. I am here, and matters are as they are, and perhaps the best thing we can do is to say no more about them just now.'

The next day about noon Harding was to leave, and early in the morning he had the promised interview with Blanche. She did not appear at breakfast, but during that meal the father took an opportunity to say to him, in an undertone,

'Miss Vernon has been made aware of our arrangement,—you will find her alone in the drawing-room when you wish to see her.'

He lost no time in acting upon the hint. As he entered the room she was seated with her head supported by her hand, and apparently deep in thought, but on hearing his footstep she raised her face, and quickly putting off a somewhat anxious look, greeted him with a smile.

He smiled in reply, but rather nervously, and his tone was a little confused as he said,—

‘I’ve come to say good-bye to you, Miss Ver—, Blanche.’

‘Must not I see you to the threshold with the others, then?’ she asked, still smiling.

‘On the contrary, I hope you will be answered in a more self-possessed and cheerful tone. I would like yours to be the last hand I touched. Still the “good-bye at the door” will have to be a formal one,—*this* must be ours.’


‘Yes,’ she answered, ‘I suppose it’s the last opportunity we shall have of being alone together—for some time.’

‘And may I really hope that my good-bye is only to be for a time?’ he asked eagerly. ‘You know what I mean, Blanche,—you’ve been made aware of what passed between your father and me?’

‘Not exactly of what passed,’ she answered demurely; ‘but mamma explained the arrangement it had led to, and at the same time her own proper horror and

indignation at the unwisdom and wickedness of our conduct.'

'Blanche!' he exclaimed, impulsively stepping to her side, and taking her hand, 'I *do* love you, far, far more than I can ever say, far too well to love you to your injury, even for the gain of my own life's happiness. There is a good deal in what your parents say ; perhaps our conduct has been unwise. Worldly considerations, as they are called, are, after all, very important ones, even in a question of hearts. They may kill love, and sometimes canker even where they do not kill. They often altogether change the current of life, and I would not wish to be the cause of their turning the current of your life into a less smooth channel than it might otherwise have run in. I'm hopeful, but hope doesn't always command success. I may never be a better match than I would be now, and will certainly never be as good a one as you could command. If you regard what you




have said as a pledge to me I release you from it. My own wish, as well as my promise to your father, is to leave you free. If, when I am gone, you come to think upon what has occurred between us as having been a mere piece of passing romance, that should not be allowed to stand in the way of solid advantages that may be offered to you; if you come to think this, and act upon it, I shall only wish you happiness, however unhappy I may be myself.'

He spoke in a low tone, but with all the breathless eagerness of passion; and the paling and flushing of her cheek, and occasional quiver of her lip, showed that she did not listen unmoved. The smile, that she had forced at the commencement of the interview, had quite passed away from her face, over which there had come a half sad, half proud expression; and there was a tremble in her voice as, raising her head, and

looking full into his eyes, she answered,

‘Lionel, when I hesitated to confess my love yesterday, it was not so much because I saw but too plainly that there were obstacles to its course running smoothly, as because I feared lest those obstacles might in some way become a clog upon you in your endeavours to make a career for yourself. Personally, I was prepared to bear and battle with them, believing that the end would be a reward for all—personally, I am prepared to do so still. I speak thus—with an unfeminine boldness, perhaps—so that you may thoroughly understand *my* feelings; but if you wish—’

‘No, Blanche, anything but that,’ he burst in impetuously. ‘I know what you would say, “if *I* wish to be free.” You don’t really think I would wish it. As to obstacles being a clog upon my exertions, there is no room for such an idea. They will only incite me to work; and, knowing that it brings me nearer to you, work will



seem a pleasure rather than a toil. I only feared lest my love should make me too selfish to be just to you. I did not wish to take an unfair advantage of your goodness of heart, or of an avowal that *might* in some measure have been due to an impulse of pity; besides, I was restrained by my promise to your father. I want to keep it fairly.'

'And you shall, Lionel! There shall be no such engagement between us as, according to the strictest interpretation of the proprieties, would prevent me marrying another.'

'Just so;—that is your father's idea. We must *part* wholly unpledged; but if on the expiration of the term of truce our feelings are still unchanged, then we may become engaged subject to my making a fitting position for myself.'

'Yes,' she said, smiling again; 'and I have little doubt either as regards the "if" or your being able to make a com-

fortable position, for that is all that is required. I know you would not wish me to be your wife on less, and I want no more. I don't care for a good match—I hate the phrase. A good match that is only a good match is generally a bad marriage. I would rather have comfort with the man I loved than splendour with any other.'

'I know you're a noble girl, Blanche,' he murmured, 'and I'll try to be worthy of you; any way, come what will, you will never find another that can love you more than I do.'

She blushed in silence for a brief space, and then recovering from her confusion, smilingly said,

'But you came to say good-bye, Lionel?'

'Yes; and now that we understand each other I had better say it,' he answered, taking her hand, 'otherwise I shall be saying or doing something in contravention of the spirit of my promise :

I feel too happy to be self-restrained much longer, so good-bye, Blanche, good-bye.'

'Good-bye, Lionel,' she replied, and as she spoke she slightly raised her blushing face, a movement that seemed too much for his self-possession, for with an impulsive movement he threw his arm round her neck and imprinted a passionate kiss upon her lips, then again hastily murmuring, 'Good-bye, good-bye, darling,' he hurried from the room.

He saw her again, as she had implied would be the case, when as he was about to depart he was making his adieux to the other members of the family. And even then, though each tried to appear simply conventional, they involuntarily exchanged looks that were full of love and meaning.

Mr Grainger, who was standing by, closely though furtively watching, caught those looks, and they confirmed him in a conclusion at which he had already arrived, and a determination based upon it.

His idea was, that the love-making between Harding and Blanche had been unknown to any member of her family, and up to the last two days his idea so far, as the reader is aware, was correct. But he further made up his mind that Harding before going would try to entangle Blanche in a secret engagement and promise of correspondence—possibly in a promise to marry him first and acquaint her parents with the fact of her having done so afterwards. The glances which he saw them exchange was to him an evidence that something of this kind had been done ; and he resolved to—as he phrased it to himself—cross Harding's game, by insinuating, or, if necessary, broadly putting his suspicions to Mr Vernon. This he found an opportunity of doing the same afternoon.

‘By the way, Vernon,’ he said, during a pause in a desultory conversation on business topics, ‘I should fancy you weren't exactly sorry to see the back of that Harding.’

‘No; I’m rather inclined to be sorry that I ever saw his face.’

Grainger was rather taken aback by this answer, and stammered out,—‘I meant about—I was thinking, you know—perhaps it didn’t strike you, but it looked to me as if he was making up to Miss Vernon. He is one of your softly-going ladies’ men,—just the sort of fellow to try to trap a young lady into a marriage unknown to her parents, if he thought she had money.’

‘No; I’ll give him his due,—he’s no mere money-seeking adventurer; if anything, he’s too much the other way,—too romantic, inclined to believe in love leveling all,—a cottage and content, and all the rest of it.’

‘Do you know that he *has* been making love to your daughter?’

‘I did not know it till yesterday, and then he came to me and coolly asked my consent to his becoming engaged to her.’

‘With her knowledge, I suppose?’

‘Well, yes, after a fashion. Of course, like other young people, she has her romantic side, and nonsense is catching.’

‘And what did you say to him?’ asked Grainger with a lowering brow.

‘Told him the thing wasn’t to be thought of for a moment,—was altogether impracticable.’

‘And what did he say?’

‘Well, he wouldn’t take a first no as an answer; and the fact is, I had to finesse with him,’ answered Mr Vernon, with a forced lightness of tone, but ill concealing a real uneasiness of manner. ‘Had he alone been concerned, I could have dismissed him decisively enough at a word; but Blanche, who is one of those who can be led but not driven, might perhaps have looked upon my doing so as an arbitrary proceeding,—she has some curious notions.’

‘Well, well! but what did you do

with him?' Grainger interrupted impatiently.

'Well, by way of obviating what might have become a difficulty, I humoured him,—I got him to promise that he would make no attempt to communicate with her for six months, on condition that at the end of that time I would withdraw my opposition if Blanche herself desired to be engaged to him, which, of course, she will not do.'

'Do you feel sure of that?'

'Oh yes; she is a very sensible girl upon the whole. If for a moment she has forgotten what is due to herself and us, she will soon come to understand it again, when it is properly put before her. Love in a cottage looks very well in the distance, when viewed through sentimental spectacles; but she would soon appreciate the seamy side of it when she saw it shown up.'

'But there is such a thing as getting

on in the world ; she might say she would wait till he could offer something greater than love in a cottage.'

'She might, if nothing better offered in the mean time.'


'Hasn't she refused better things?'

'Well, you see, there are men who would be hard bargains at any price. Blanche can't stand a fool, and doesn't care as much as most girls about birth or rank. The man that wins her must be something more than merely wealthy,—he must be a man with something in him.'

'You were speaking just now about her being brought to understand what she owed to herself and you. Do you think, now, that if it came to a trial, she would give way to save you from any trouble and disappointment that her going against your wishes might bring upon you?'

'I think so.'

'For instance, suppose a marriage that you greatly desired was in question—a



marriage, I mean, with a man who was *not* a fool, who had shown that he *had* something in him, and whom in a general way she liked—would your influence be sufficient to induce her to accept that man, in spite of any crotchet of her own about this Harding?’

‘I have no doubt it would even in a general way, though, if necessary, I could put special circumstances before her that would make the matter a certainty.’

‘And if need was, you would?’

‘And if need was, I would—pointedly.’

And Grainger asking no more questions, the conversation dropped.

The flimsy artifice—kept up by both speakers—of having no ‘case in point’ under discussion, was intended rather as a cover for bold speaking than as a veil to meaning or motive. Each knew perfectly well what the other was aiming at. Each was sounding the other, and allowing

himself to be sounded—as far as suited his purpose. Though they had never spoken even thus plainly before, Vernon had long known that Grainger wished to win his daughter, while Grainger had been aware that the other had been more than merely willing to have him for a son-in-law. Both had been quietly working to effect the wished-for consummation, but the change in the position of affairs consequent upon the introduction of Harding upon the scene had led them to feel that some prompter mode of action would be necessary. Each had been anxious to come to something like a definite understanding, and in the conversation just recorded the desired understanding had been tacitly arrived at.

But though, so far as the form of the conversation had allowed, each of them had sought to impress the other with an idea of their candour and unreserve in coming to the point, each had strictly kept

something to himself. But, while Grainger had to a certain extent divined Vernon's secret, the latter had no thought or premonition of the *coup* which the other was planning with a view to forcing matters to an issue.


CHAPTER VI.

MR GRAINGER TAKES ACTION.

‘YOU are going to leave us to-day, then, Mr Grainger?’ said Blanche Vernon, when three mornings later he joined her as she was sauntering along one of the garden paths.

‘It’s not so much that I’m going as that I must go,’ he answered; ‘as a matter of choice, I would rather stay on here than go back to my own dull, solitary quarters.’

‘Well, really, Mr Grainger,’ she said, smiling, ‘I have often wondered myself that a gentleman of your means should continue to live on in what, I suppose, is the aptly-named Black country. I can’t



admit that you have a legitimate right to that tone of complaint: your quarters being dull and solitary or the reverse lies with yourself.'

'No, Miss Vernon, there you are wrong. Their *not* being dull and solitary does not lie with me, and that being the case, the locality is scarcely worth thinking about. There are very few people more really, and, if properly considered, more sadly solitary, than I am. Even you, I dare say, think it strange to hear me speaking in this way,—no one knows better than myself how other people think of me. I am a hard-headed, hard-hearted, hard-fisted fellow, caring for nothing but making money, and by no means particular as to how or at whose expense I do make it. That's the popular opinion about me; and though, because I *have* made money, there are hundreds that will cringe to me and flatter me, I know there is not one of them that cares a straw about me from

feelings of affection, or that believes I would care for affection, or have anything of it in my own nature. Isn't that being solitary? Why, I don't suppose there is a labourer about my works that envies me my money and rise in the world, and thinks what a heavenly, happy fellow I must be, but what is really happier himself; has a wife, or children, or some one that cares for him, and that would sorrow for him if trouble fell upon him.'

'Oh, come, Mr Grainger, I think you take too gloomy a view of the matter. I must confess that I shared the belief that you were wholly wedded to business, but I never entertained any thought of all the hard things you speak of. And even if the thing stands as you put it, I still adhere to my opinion, that the remedy is in your own hands. Why, save from choice, should you be worse off than your labourers in regard to disinterested family affection and sympathy? Why not have a wife and

children to care for you? Why not marry?’

‘Because, in the first place, Miss Vernon, I must love where I marry, and it’s not in my nature to love the style of girl who would marry me simply because I am rich. In the second place, the style of girl I could love—the style of girl who, without being sillily romantic, looks upon riches as a secondary consideration, is rather rare in a general way, and very rare, indeed, in the money-making or seeking circles, in which a man like me has mostly to form his intimacies. And finally, because I am gravely doubtful as to whether the only girl of this stamp that I know and am wishful to marry would think sufficiently well of me to marry me, or, indeed, think of me at all in that light.’

‘You could soon satisfy yourself on the last point.’

‘I could; but though fairly bold in most things, I shrink from the mere

thought of disappointment in that. There are things about which it is better to remain in doubt and fear, than to know the worst. Now you know the reasons why I am not married. It is not because I am "wholly wedded to business," or have not the feelings that lead men to marry. I have such feelings far more strongly than your "nice" men, who show them all on the surface, and would do and dare far more to win a wife or make her happy when won than they would ever dream of.'

'I do not doubt your feeling strongly whatever you do feel,' she said, and then the subject dropped.

The opportunity of starting it had arisen in a fairly incidental manner, and Mr Grainger had spoken throughout with real feeling; but he had been wishing for some such chance, and having diverted the conversation into the desired channel, watched keenly to note its effects. Upon

the whole, he was disappointed in the result. He saw that Blanche did not—as he phrased it to himself—‘take;’ did not see that for her there was intended to be more in his language than met the ear; that it was herself who was the bright particular, though unnamed, she to whom he alluded. Still he did not consider that their talk had been altogether without advantage to him. He had enlightened her upon one important particular, had made her understand that he was something more than merely a clever, pushing, successful money-maker; that he was a man who could love, and who desired to be loved. This he looked upon as a good point made, and presently he had an opportunity of making what he conceived to be another.


‘My idea was, that it was our place you would have thought dull,’ Blanche said, by way of breaking a silence that was becoming embarrassing; ‘but if you find it an agreeable change, you might run

down oftener. I'm sure papa is always delighted to see you.'

'I come now as often as business will allow. You see business is a touchy thing, —if you leave it too often it takes to leaving you.'

His words seemed to have touched some chord in her mind, for an expression of suddenly aroused interest came over her face, and her voice was more earnest than it had hitherto been as she said:—

'Well, Mr Grainger, my knowledge of the subject is, of course, very limited and general, but somehow I cannot help thinking that of late years business has been far too much deified; has, by an over-reaching competitive eagerness, been made more engrossing than its true necessities require; more all-engrossing than is good, even for those who may be making wealth by it. I see you are surprised, but I speak with very sufficient reason,—I am thinking of papa. I am sure since he has taken to




deal with a lot of business outside of his own profession he has been quite a different man. He seems to have neither time nor spirit for the enjoyments of life,—he is always working, always full of care. His manner is gloomy, and he is breaking down bodily. He may be making money by all this business, but he is certainly losing health and happiness, and causing us all to feel wretched. We were very comfortably off before; and no amount of money can in my opinion compensate for such evils as I speak of. I wish he could be got to altogether give up entering into these new business affairs.

He knew that the last words were intended as an appeal to him to use his influence with her father, and he could tell by her quickened breathing and heightened colour how strongly her feelings were interested; but rapidly deciding that it would not suit his own view to accede to the appeal, he affected not to have understood it.

‘Well, there is a great deal in what you say, Miss Vernon,’ he answered; ‘business, like a great many other things, does go fast in the present age. There are some engaged in it who will go at a racing pace, and can; and those who would not be left behind must either be able to live that pace, or they must make up for it by keeping constantly going. The game, as you say, may often not be worth the candle, and many of the men see that; but it’s not always a mere question of money,—there is pride and rivalry: no one likes to acknowledge himself beaten,—every man knows that there will be some who would crow over him if he was to give in. I know many a score would over me. All the same, however, business now-a-days does take a great deal out of a man, even if he is successful in it, while it takes still more out of him if he is unsuccessful.’

Blanche Vernon’s face went suddenly



pale as he finished speaking. The subject that had troubled her mind had by Grainger's concluding words been made to flash upon her in a more disastrous light than any she had ever contemplated it in before. Unsuccessful! The very word sent a chill through her. Hitherto she had only thought of her father as too much 'wrapped up' in business, and so lured on by its profitable results as to follow it, to the utter disregard of what she considered to be higher things. She had been inclined to think reproachfully of him,—to think that he had degenerated under his recently developed greed of gain; had become harsh, uncertain, unsocial of temper, a less kindly and courteous head of the household, a less true gentleman than he had been. And what if in all this she had been cruelly misjudging him? What if, instead of making he had been losing money, and his care and anxiety had been all on their account—to keep the knowledge of trouble

from the family ; to try and retrieve the losses for their sakes ? What if this had been the case, and he had been bearing his grief alone and all unselfishly, while she had been thinking so hardly of him ?

Such were the thoughts that passed through her mind in the few moments during which she was unable to speak, and as they came upon her it was of herself that she came to think reproachfully.

‘ Has papa been unsuccessful, then ? ’ she said at last. ‘ Of course it will seem very short-sighted to you, even for a girl, but that view of the case never occurred to me. He never spoke—’

‘ But, my dear Miss Vernon,’ Grainger interrupted, ‘ we seem to have got at cross purposes. I only spoke generally, I did not say that your father had been unsuccessful.’

‘ You did not *say* it, but you know that such is the case ? ’ she said, looking at him doubtingly.

‘No; so far as I actually know his business, I know to the contrary. I know that in the one or two instances in which he has distinctly asked my advice and acted upon it he has been successful. But while I wish you to understand that I had no intention of alarming you, I would not like you at any future time to come to think that I had wilfully misled you. Men don’t tell all their business, and especially losses. It’s possible, and, indeed, unless he is more fortunate than almost any other man I know, highly probable that your father, like other business men, has had reverses. I have noticed that of late he has looked rather anxious. Still I don’t suppose that there is anything seriously wrong. I would be exceedingly sorry if I thought there was,—he would feel it so keenly.’


‘He would, indeed, and so would we all, and that is why I wish he would give up this speculating altogether. A man who is

likely to keenly feel the evils that may any day come of it isn't fit for it.'

'Well, as long as your father says nothing to you I think you may rest satisfied on his account. I know he has the greatest reliance upon your good sense and affection, and those are qualities that will often enable a woman to do a great deal even in a matter of business. And since we have drifted into this subject, let me say, Miss Vernon,—and I say it with all sincerity—that if, as might happen to myself or any other man, things were at any time to go so far wrong with your father as to make friendly assistance desirable, you would always find a friend in me.'

'I believe you, Mr Grainger,' she said, 'and am grateful for your kindness; but at the same time,' she added, forcing a slight smile, 'you must excuse me saying that in that respect, at least, I hope we shall not want your friendship.'


'Well, let us hope not,' he said, also



smiling, and there the conversation ended, as it was evident from the change in her manner she did not care about following the subject any further. Nor, indeed, did he. He had said as much as he wished to say, and with the desired effect. He felt sure that, even while arguing against it, he had impressed her with the idea that her father was in all probability in difficulties, and that it was at least quite possible that he might any day be placed in a position to need such aid as only a rich, influential business man could give. And this he thought would naturally suggest to her that her father had practical as well as merely conventional reasons for objecting to her marrying a poor man,—for wishing her to marry such a man as could and would assist him, should the occasion for assistance arise, as he was determined it should and that shortly. He considered that he had turned her thoughts into a train favourable to his wishes, and associated his own

individuality with those thoughts; and this and the fact of his having disabused her of her previous notions as to his insensibility to softer feelings he looked upon as a good day's work, and he went away in a tolerably self-satisfied humour.

Mr Grainger's first thoughts on reaching home were of his 'right-hand man,' and the last conversation he had held with him. He was perfectly acquainted with his idiosyncrasies; and while he had profited by them in a general way, he stood rather in awe of them when they chanced to be brought to bear upon himself. He knew that in 'reading' people or in divining 'the situation' in matters that turned upon questions of motive or feeling, Mr Barber rarely made a mistake. He knew, further, that he fancied himself in that respect, and felt certain that he would expect to find him coming back sore and disappointed; would take a cynical pleasure in his doing so, since it would confirm the accuracy of



his views. This triumph he determined not to afford him; and knowing that silence would be construed against him, and wishing, moreover, to elicit, without directly asking for it, Barber's opinion with regard to the plan he contemplated for winning Blanche Vernon, he took an early opportunity of alluding to his visit. On the evening of the day after his return Barber had gone to his private residence, to consult him on a point of business that had arisen after he had left the office. The business despatched, Grainger asked him to stay to dinner, and it was over their after-dinner wine that he broached the subject.

'You were right about how things were going at Vernon's,' he said; 'about the daughter and the fellow that was staying there, I mean,—they *were* making love.'

'There was no doubt about their *making* it,' said Barber; 'do you know, though, whether anything practical has come of it yet? have they been *speaking* it?'


‘Yes. I’ll give him his due,—he’s a go-ahead gentleman and a bold one : *he* spoke it both to father and daughter before he went away.’

‘Ah well, his having to go away would force him on ; still it was a bold thing, for he was a good deal too shrewd not to know how Vernon would go on the question. I suppose he did take the perish-the-thought line ?’

‘Yes ; he doesn’t believe in a “poor young man” for his daughter.’

‘And yet, as they tell me, his own marriage was a love one ; but he’ll see love affairs now through a middle-aged mind. Did the girl take it all quietly ?’

‘Well, the fact is, Vernon temporized on her account. To keep her quiet till she got rid of any nonsense that the fellow had put into her head, he said that if she was in the same mind six months later he would let them have their own way, as far as he was concerned.’



‘Well, if he thinks he has got rid of the subject by saying that, it strikes me he has made a great mistake. Of course there are women who would change their feelings a dozen times in six months, but there are others who, when they have once made up their mind,—and upon this subject especially,—don’t change it at all, and I am very greatly deceived if she isn’t one of them. She could well afford to take things quietly. There’ll be no change in her at the end of six months, and then she’ll have his promise to justify her in taking her own way against any opposition that might be offered then. Harding has played his game well.’

‘That remains to be seen; I don’t think he has. I have very good reasons for believing that Vernon was only playing for time, and he got it; and that’s all I want. That Harding played his own hand boldly and cleverly enough I’ve no wish to deny, but he had no idea of the game of

the other players. Any way, you may lay mighty long odds he won't win. What you say would be all very well, perhaps, if things were going to remain just as they are, or, rather, as this Harding and Miss Vernon think they are. But circumstances alter cases, and I mean to alter circumstances in this affair. In fact, I have already begun to do so.'

'Oh!'

'Yes; she had two ideas,—one, that I looked with contempt upon anything in the way of sentiment; the other, that her father was merely oppressed with the cares of money-making. I have disabused her of both. I have let her know that I have passion,—strong passion in my nature; that I could love a sensible, high-spirited girl, who, if she loved a man at all, would not love him only for his money; that the only such girl that I have met I do love. And I've put it into her mind that there are other things



in business beside the work to make a man look anxious and distracted,—that there are crosses and losses. The last, I know has taken hold of her, and set her thinking; and perhaps after a while she will be able to see the drift of the other thing, and connect the two together.'

'Well, but twos and twos of that kind don't always make the particular fours we wish them to do. She is likely enough to come to understand in a general way that she was probably the particular girl you were alluding to, and that a rich son-in-law might be of great use to her father if he is in difficulties; but what then?'

'She'll very soon be brought to see it in a more than general way,—in a very special and personal way. Without knowing details, I know that her father *is* in difficulties,—very far in them, I fancy. He has borrowed a lot of money of Burring, and he is paying for renewals at a

rate that shows that he must be tremendously hard run. He would like me to marry Blanche, so that I might put him straight in money matters, as I certainly would do if I did marry her. This much we quite understand between ourselves, though it hasn't been said in so many words; and as I should have to pay the money any way, I shall do it in a way to suit myself. This is my little plan: I shall quietly get Burrage to put the screw on him unexpectedly, tight, and to the full extent of his power. That will place him in such a fix as only "a generous benefactor" can save him from. At the right moment I shall step in and *be* the generous benefactor; and if it is rightly worked—as it will be, for he will work with me—Blanche will marry the benefactor of the family.'

'Well, yes;—she is the kind of girl who would be likely enough to sacrifice herself under such circumstances as those,

that is, if they are so well worked that she has no suspicion of their being worked at all. It will cost you a heap of money, though, one way and another.'

'This is just the sort of thing I really value money for,' answered Grainger, a flush of passion rising to his cheeks. 'I'd throw away all the money in England to win her, not to speak of cutting out this Harding, after he thinks he has put me out of court.'

'Oh, well,' said Barber laughing, 'if you are harping on that string yet; if it's a question of beating a man as well as winning a woman, I shall be more prepared to see you come off victorious. Still it's a ticklish matter,—it turns mostly upon questions of passion and feeling, and where they are concerned it is but little use to calculate upon the result of this or that premeditated stroke.'

'Well, we'll see,' said Grainger.

'Yes; that's all we can say with cer-

tainty,' answered Barber, and no more was said.

Mr Grainger was quite correct in saying that his hints as to the possibility of her father being in difficulties had taken a hold upon Blanche Vernon's mind. They had indeed taken a deep and painful hold upon it. Thinking of the change that had come over her father, she remembered many little things that now seemed to her confirmatory of the view that Grainger's words had suggested. Almost unconsciously she took to watching his every movement, to trying to read his face, to being specially—though unobtrusively—tender and affectionate about him; and her constant aspiration was that she were able to do something to lighten his troubles or console him under them. But when she made attempts to gain his confidence he always evaded them. There was nothing the matter, he would say, at least, nothing particular, nothing that

she could understand or do anything in. But this did not reassure her ;—still she watched, and to her observing eyes it seemed, judging by his face, that his troubles grew greater and greater. One morning, about a month after Mr Grainger's visit, when her father was, according to his custom, opening and glancing through his letters while he sat at breakfast, her attention was attracted by a slight rustling sound, which, though unnoticed by her mother and brother, caused her to look up in alarm. She saw, as she had expected, that the letter was trembling in his hand ; and she saw, too, that he had gone deadly pale, and that his lips twitched convulsively. He caught her eye, and by a glance commanded her to be silent, and she obeyed. She found no immediate opportunity of speaking, but she felt certain that the letter must have contained some dreadfully crushing tidings. Watching with redoubled anxiety, she

could tell that he was fighting desperately against this new trouble ; but as days went on, and he grew visibly more haggard, as replies came to the telegrams and letters which he despatched in hot haste, she could tell, too, that the fight was going against him. A week later, on his going into his study for some papers he wanted to take to the office with him, she followed him, and laying her hand on his shoulder, said,—

‘ Papa, don’t go out,—you are not fit to be on your feet. I don’t want to pry into your business, if it is not fitting that I should know it; but I cannot see you suffering like this any longer without speaking. Stay at home and rest yourself, if it is only for to-day.’

‘ Being on or off my feet makes no difference, Blanche,’ he answered, shaking his head. ‘ It’s my mind that wants rest, and merely staying at home won’t give rest to

that; besides, I have something to do that must be done to-day.'

'I know you are in great trouble, I—'

'I am in great trouble, in very great trouble,' he interrupted, 'in trouble that will fall very heavily upon you, my poor Blanche, and upon your mother; trouble that I have brought about myself, and that I would willingly bear all alone if I could; but I won't be able to keep it from you many hours longer, though even now I can't bring myself to tell it to you.'

She would have spoken, but checking her by a gesture, he resumed:—

'But you must try not to think harshly of me when you know. I have been weak, and drifted deeper and deeper, as men do. I have brought you all to poverty, Blanche.'

His tone and manner had brought a vague gloomy fear upon her; but as he finished speaking her face brightened up,

and it was in a tone of relief that she exclaimed—

‘Poverty! Why, papa, I’m sure we would all a thousand times rather be in poverty than see you as you have been of late.’

‘I know you will make all allowances, Blanche,’ he answered; ‘but the world won’t,—it judges broadly and by results. When what I have done is known I shall be spoken of as a bad, bad man,—a man who has brought ruin on others in trying to gratify his own ambition. And if when you are in adversity it comes to look coldly upon you, you may come to think reproachfully of me.’

There was a look of eager questioning in his eyes as he spoke, and tears were gathering in hers, as going up to him and throwing her arms round his neck, she answered,—

‘No, papa, never! You have always been kind and loving to us. If you have



been ambitious, it has been for us as well as yourself; and come what will, I am sure that we will never love you less,—that we will love you more for that you are in trouble. We won't let poverty frighten us or sour us; and as to the world, if it turns its back upon us, why, we must just try the more to be all in all to each other.'

'Ah, Blanche,' he said, 'I begin to think that it would have been wise to have told you everything before this. There was a time when I might have told you all, and you might have helped me. But that time is past now,' he went on, again checking her, as she was about to speak. 'All that you can do now is to console and nerve me, and that you have done this morning to a degree you cannot understand yet.'

'But must you really go out?' she asked, still clinging to his neck, as he attempted to move away.

He paused for a moment as if debating the question with himself, and then with a dreary sigh, answered,

‘Yes, I must go, Blanche,—there is no help for it.’

‘Shall I say anything to mamma and Sidney,’ she asked, ‘or will you?’

‘Well, you had better tell them in a general way what has passed between us,’ he answered; ‘it will prepare them for bad news.’


‘You will see we shall all bear it bravely,’ she said, with a faint smile.

‘You’ll never blame me, then, Blanche?’

‘Never, papa!’ she answered.

‘I do believe you,’ he said earnestly; ‘but, there, I must go. Good-bye, Blanche.’

As he spoke he stooped and kissed her passionately, and then, ere she could return his good-bye, hurried from the house.




CHAPTER VII.

THE EFFECTS OF THE SCREW.

ACTING upon the permission she had received, Blanche told her mother and Sidney of the conversation she had had with her father,—told them in general terms that he had admitted that pecuniary embarrassment was the cause of his looking so troubled; that, as well as she could understand, his difficulties were of so serious a character as to be likely to lead to a material alteration in their position in life.

But when in the afternoon her father did not return from the office at the usual hour, she said nothing to the others of the

vague, uneasy feeling of apprehension to which that circumstance gave rise in her mind. She could not have said of what it was she was apprehensive. It was merely nervousness, she argued, trying to reassure herself. She felt as if she must be doing something,—as if, at any rate, she must be in motion. She moved restlessly about the house and grounds, and at length, about eight o'clock, quietly slipped out. She had at the moment no set purpose in doing so, had done it in sheer restlessness, but presently it occurred to her that she would go to the office, which was hardly half a mile away, and make some inquiries as to her father's movements. She knew his room in the office, and, seeing that there was no light in its window, she concluded that he must have left, and was turning away when the woman—an old servant of the family—who acted as house-keeper on the premises, happening to come to the door, she turned again and asked—



‘At what time did papa leave, Mrs Butler?’

‘He hasn’t left, Miss,’ was the answer.

‘Not left?’ said Blanche in surprise; ‘there is no light in his room.’


‘No light in his room?’ echoed the woman, surprised in her turn. ‘No, more there ain’t,’ she went on, stepping into the road, and looking up at the window. ‘I suppose he must be in one of the other rooms; I heard the boy say he had been all about to-day, sorting papers. He’s very busy, and hasn’t seen anybody that has called. Shall I tell him you want him?’

‘No, thank you,’ Blanche answered; ‘I merely wish to say a word to him. I’ll just step up myself.’

She spoke calmly enough, but there was deadly fear at her heart. The nameless dread that had haunted her during the day, the ‘nervousness,’ as she still tried to think it, came back upon her with all the force of a presentiment, and her

limbs trembled under her as she ascended the stairs.

Her father's room was the inner one of three, opening into each other. The first two were, as she expected, empty, but in each was burning a single gaslight, that served to show the way to the landing. In the other room she knew that there was no light, but on reaching its door she listened eagerly for some sound from it. But all was still—still as death. No rustle of paper, no sound of a moving pen, no human movement or breathing. All was silent, so utterly silent that, with her senses sharpened by fear, she could easily have detected even the slightest of the sounds for which she had listened. In the unstrung state of her nerves this silence appalled her; but she made a desperate effort to fight down the feeling of horror that was creeping over. 'He must have gone without Mrs Butler noticing him,' she said to herself, and partly turned to go.




But no,—there was the gas evidently left burning to light him out, the offices all unlocked. Was he asleep? Yes, that must be it. At home he often lay down for a little while between the lights: he had done so here, and worn out by his anxieties, had been overtaken by slumber. She would see.

‘Papa! papa!’ she cried softly. But there was no answer; and after waiting a few seconds she knocked at the door, and, in a voice made loud by agitation, again called out, ‘Papa! papa!’

Still there was no answer, no indication of movement within the room; when the sound of her own voice ceased the same utter silence reigned again, even her own heart seeming to stand still with fear. For a few moments she remained motionless, in her listening attitude; stood with staring eyes, and a scared, terrified expression on her face, and with a feeling as of an icy circle spreading around her lips.

At length she heaved a long shivering sigh, and the blood came rushing back to her blanched face, making her head grow dizzy. She staggered back a pace or two, and passed her hands across her eyes as if to clear them; then with a quick, nervous, half-unconscious movement, she stepped to the door again, and, opening it, crossed the threshold of the room, into which the gas from the adjoining apartment threw a dim light. By this light she could just make out that her father lay on a couch, with one arm thrown over the back of it, and his face to the wall. Seeing this, she tried to reassure herself; to think, or rather to hope, that, after all, she had been right,—that he *had* merely fallen asleep. She stepped softly across the room, as if afraid of wakening him; but when she reached his side, and could look on his face, she knew at a glance that the worst of the fears against which she had battled had been realized. She knew that he was



dead—dead by his own act, as the small phial labelled ‘Poison’ lying beside his hand sufficiently indicated. She saw and understood it all even in the instant, when, with a half-stifled scream, she fell senseless across his body.


As no sound of what had taken place in the office reached the housekeeper’s department, it was, perhaps, fortunate that Blanche Vernon’s swoon was of short duration. In a few minutes she began to ‘come to herself,’ and her first confused idea was that she was awakening from some horrid nightmare. For a moment the idea gave a feeling of relief; but only for a moment! The next instant memory and feeling reasserted their sway. There, under her arms, lay the dread evidence that all was but too real. Gently she turned her dead father’s face to the light, but the last gleam of desperate hope that prompted the action was blotted out at a glance. He was indeed dead,—utterly

and for ever beyond all human aid. But though she felt that it would be a useless formality she rang the bell, and, meeting the housekeeper in the outer office, despatched her for a doctor. Then she went back to the inner room, and, lighting the gas, seated herself beside the corpse, and a strange, dreamy calmness fell upon her. Occasionally, when out shopping or on the way to parties, she had called for her father, and knew the general appearance of the room, and as she now looked slowly round it she could tell that it had been thoroughly put in order. Papers and letters had been done into bundles, labelled, and methodically arranged. Both the waste-paper basket and the grate were overflowing with papers that had been cast aside in the clearing out. On some of the drawers of a large cabinet freshly-written labels, indicating the nature of the documents placed in them, had been pasted, and on the desk, as she presently noticed,



there lay a letter addressed to herself. She took it, and opened it, and noted, with a sort of curious interest, that it was firmly written. Then she glanced hastily through it, gathering just sufficient of its purport to find that it contained disclosures of a character such as by this time she was in a great measure prepared to expect. It commenced by explaining why he had left his letter of confession to her rather than to his wife or son. As her anxiety about him had chanced to lead to his taking her partly into his confidence, he had thought it best that she should be the first to know all, and convey it to the others. Then it went on to tell the old, old story, the story that had so often been written under similar circumstances,—the writer standing on the brink of the self-accorded grave in which he has resolved to seek shelter from the self-wrought un-avertable shame, the prospect of which seems more bitter than death. He had

speculated in matters of which he knew nothing, and had sustained heavy losses. In trying to retrieve the first, other losses had followed, the whole of his own fortune had been swallowed; then, in an evil moment, when greatly pressed, and when there appeared to be a chance of saving a very large amount at a single stroke, he had appropriated securities belonging to a client. These, too, had been lost, and other malappropriations had followed in the desperate hope that some lucky hit would enable him to win back all. But the lucky hit had not come, and just at the time when his resources were reduced to the lowest ebb a money-lender, with whom he was involved to a very large amount, had refused to allow him to renew his bills, and peremptorily demanded payment in full. This made discovery certain; and rather than live the life that his would be after his crime was made known,



he had resolved to die, and would be a dead man when she read the letter.

She folded the letter, and put it away with a dreary sigh, and then with the same day-dreamy calmness her thoughts and memory fell to wandering over the events of the day. In the morning she had had a vague impression that there was an undercurrent of meaning even darker than his words directly indicated in what her father had said. Now she could see this meaning with perfect clearness, both generally and in detail. Now that she could understand the significance of his having done so, she remembered that when leaving her he had said, not good-morning, but good-bye. She knew now what the 'something' was that he had said must be done that day, and for which there was no help; why he had been so anxious to hear her say that she would never be brought to think reproach-

fully of him. She understood it all now, and stooping down and kissing his brow, she murmured: 'Poor papa! how you must have suffered, however you sinned.' And clasping the hand of the corpse and looking sadly into its face, the doctor and housekeeper found her when they came. Life was quite extinct, the doctor said, after a moment's examination. He further informed her that 'it' had been done with prussic acid, and then, in a rather hesitating tone, and regarding her earnestly as he spoke, he asked,

'Shall I break the intelligence to your people, Miss Vernon?'

'No, thank you,' she answered; 'I'll take it myself.'

And she did. She told her mother and brother all. That the husband and father was dead,—had died by his own hand; that they were beggared and their names dishonoured. She told it with all gentleness and with a wonderful calmness,

but still the news fell with crushing weight, and made the home of the Vernons a house of bitter mourning.

Later in the night, however, the doctor, acting in his own discretion, did come down, and asking to see Mrs Vernon, told her that he did not like Blanche's manner. 'Her apparent calmness,' he said, 'was a bad sign, was suggestive of the brain and nerves being partially benumbed. The scene she had gone through had given her a terrible shock, — she should be kept quiet, and if possible got to sleep.'

But when about midnight her father's body was brought home, Blanche found the relief of tears, and the danger the doctor feared passed away.

Clive Vernon's suicide and the discovery of the causes that had led to it created 'an immense sensation' in Stonebury. The news, together with sundry exaggerated rumours, spread rapidly. It became the talk of the town, and was made

the leading topic of the local newspapers and contents placards. The general feeling was one of surprise, the general expression, 'Who'd have thought it?' though, of course, there was not wanting a number of the after-the-event school of prophets, who on their own showing had 'known what it would all come to,' and had 'told you so,' though curiously enough none of the 'yous' had any recollection of the circumstances. 'Society,' as was to be expected, was especially moved—and disgusted. It was such a dreadfully vulgar affair,—suicide, a coroner's inquest, forgery and fraud—fraud, too, by which some of their number had suffered heavy loss. Of course no person with a proper sense of the responsibilities of gentility could associate with people connected with such matters as these, especially as the Vernon ladies had never been really liked by society, the autocratic bearing of the mother and indifference of the daughter

being privately resented. So, though they received some few formal visits of condolence, the Vernons found themselves practically deserted by those who conventionally at any rate had been their former friends.

Deserted at least by all but one—Mr Grainger. To them, knowing nothing of his motives and designs, his conduct, especially by contrast with that of others, in standing by them in their trouble, seemed very noble, and they all, and especially Blanche, felt very grateful towards him. To do him justice, he had been greatly shocked on first hearing to what a tragic result his having carried out his plan of setting the money-lender to put the screw upon Vernon had led. Could he at that moment have recalled that, act even by abandoning all hope of ever winning Blanche, he would have done so. But when the first remorseful paroxysm was over he soon began to find self-excuse wherewith to salve his conscience.

‘It’s a terribly bad job, and I feel deucedly cut up over it,’ he said to Barber. ‘Of course, if I had had the least idea that he was as deeply dipped as all that I wouldn’t have put Burrage on to him; but after all, the crash would have had to come very shortly,—you see he had made away with everything convertible that he could lay hands on.’


‘Still, looking at the nature of the catastrophe, it must be unpleasant to think you hastened it,’ answered Barber; ‘at least, I should feel it so.’

‘It is unpleasant,—I’m not denying that. What I say is, that I had no intention that anything like this should happen.’

‘No; your intention was to be “the generous benefactor,” and that just illustrates what I said when we first spoke about this Harding being at Vernon’s.’

‘What was that?’

‘Why, that I-will-ism is a very dangerous thing applied to such matters as



these, especially when it goes upon the principle of everything being fair in war. Moves made under it very often *do* go disastrously beyond what was intended.'

'What I did wouldn't have hurt him if it hadn't have been for himself,' said Grainger angrily. 'It was his own I-will-ism or I-something-else-ism that brought him into the mess he was in. However, there is no use talking; of course I'm sorry it happened, and I shall do anything I can to help the family through.'

No more was said, and in due time Mr Grainger made his offer of service to the Vernons. Investigation showed that they were utterly ruined, that everything would have to go; no shred of income be saved from the wreck. They only remained in their house on sufferance until a sale was arranged; and even in the first days of their grief they had to discuss among them-

selves the problem of what they were to do in the future. But nothing more definite was decided upon than that Sidney was to look for a situation, and Blanche go out as a governess. In this position they still were, when a few days before the sale Mr Grainger spoke. He had called several times before, and in general terms had expressed his desire to be of service to them; but this day, while Blanche and he were alone, he took the opportunity of their conversation turning upon the sale to speak pointedly. After a little hesitation he asked,

‘Have you any settled plan as to what you will do afterwards?’

‘There are no details settled,’ she said, and then she told him their general idea, and asked his opinion concerning it.

‘Well, Miss Vernon,’ he answered, ‘I think all the more of you for entertaining it; but I don’t like the notion of you going out for a governess. I’ve seen what

governessing, and ladies' companioning, and that sort of thing is. It's not a very bright thing at best, and it's much oftener found at worst than best, and comes particularly heavy on those who haven't been brought up to it, and got case-hardened.

'I know it has its unpleasant side,' said Blanche; 'but then so, I fancy, have most modes of earning a livelihood; but after all they are only such troubles as others bear, and I must just do my best to bear them too.'

'Well, yes, that is true enough,' said Grainger, 'but it's best to avoid things with unpleasant sides if you can,—men should face them. Now, I've been thinking of a thing; in fact, that is why I spoke. I have just got the lease of another big iron works; and as I am going to put a new staff of managers into it, I could put Sidney into the financial department with a salary of five hundred a year, and a residence.'

‘Oh, Mr Grainger!’ she exclaimed, looking up into his face with tears gathering in her eyes, ‘you are very kind,—you are indeed a true friend. If you will do this for Sidney I shall be so glad: it will be such a good thing for him, and will secure a home for mamma. If that were done, I could fight my own battle cheerfully.’

‘Fight your own battle!’ echoed Mr Grainger, taken aback. ‘I didn’t mean—that is, I meant that it should be a home for you—for you all, that is. Why, you wouldn’t go out governing if Sidney had a berth like that, would you?’

‘I don’t know. Shouldn’t I?’ she said, with a faint smile.

‘Certainly not,’ he said; ‘there would be no occasion, I’m sure: neither your mother nor brother would like you to do so,—they would be unhappy if you did. Besides, to be candid with you, Miss Vernon, it was on your—it was to prevent

anything of that kind I made the offer. I thought it would be a home for you if you had no other in view, and, perhaps, after a while, I may be able to offer something better; I am sure I shall only be too happy if, by any means in my power, I can lighten your troubles.'

'You are very good, very good,' she murmured in a voice broken by emotion. 'We can never repay your kindness; but, believe me, we do appreciate it. It shall be just as you advise. I—I—'

'But she could say no more, — her feelings overcame her, and she sobbed aloud.'

As she broke down Grainger impulsively stepped up to her, and laying his hand on her shoulder, said in a low, earnest, sympathizing tone, 'Don't be distressed, Miss Vernon, don't be distressed. You are a good, noble-spirited girl, and you'll see bright days yet.'

They remained silent for a minute or

two with his hand still laid caressingly upon her shoulder, and then looking up and trying to smile through her tears, Blanche said,—

‘ You’ll tell mamma and Sidney this ? ’

‘ And that you’ve quite given up the governess idea, too ? ’ he said.

She nodded her head.

‘ Should I go now ? ’

‘ If you will,’ she said.

So he left her, and the same evening she heard from her mother that it was all settled.


Mr Grainger’s proposal had, to a considerable extent, been really founded upon a feeling of kindness; but still he viewed it chiefly as a step—an important step—towards the completion of his design with respect to Blanche, and he departed well pleased at his success. If, however, he had been aware of one thought by which Blanche was swayed in consenting to abandon the plan of earning an independ-

ent livelihood for herself, on which she had firmly resolved, he would scarcely have been in such a self-congratulatory mood.

After all, she thought, as there would still be a home for the family, it would be better for her to remain in it for a little while. Lionel would be back again soon, and then—and then even while she spoke to the lover whom she did not know to be such, her mind dwelt lovingly and reliantly upon the absent, and her thoughts ran—that he would direct her future; that it would be best not to take so decided a step as to go out as a servant without consulting him, lest he should not approve of it,—should dislike the idea that his wife had ever done so.

There was one other person who also in her own way stood by the Vernons in their time of trouble—Polly Mansell. Polly was not one of the dreadfully good type. She did not come up to the stand-

and of the 'faithful retainer,' who so often figures in fiction and on the stage. She had her little savings, but she did not, on hearing of the disasters that had fallen upon the Vernons, attempt to force the loan or gift of them upon the family. She did not offer to sell the dress off her back, or express herself anxious to work her fingers to the bone, and she would have declined to choose tradesmen out of their goods, with a view to maintaining the state of the household. But though she indulged in no heroics, she was nevertheless a warm-hearted, gratefully-disposed girl; and remembering that the family—and especially Blanche—had in their prosperity been kind and considerate towards her, she felt sympathy for them when adversity fell upon them; and when the other regular servants left the falling household, she volunteered in all sincerity to remain.



‘I would rather stay, Miss,’ she said to Blanche.

‘But we are no longer in a position to keep you, Polly,’ answered Blanche.

‘But I don’t mean for wages, Miss,’ said Polly, attempting to hide her confusion by volubility of expression. ‘You’ve never been particular with me when I have wanted a day out, or anything like that; and, thank goodness! I’m not without a few pounds, and I can get another place any time. Besides, Miss,’ she resumed, seeing that Blanche still looked at her doubtfully, ‘I only mean till—till—till you know, Miss.’

‘Till the home is broken up,’ said Blanche sadly.

‘You know, Miss, it would be very awkward having all new people, and such as only go out temporary, too,’ hurried on Polly, affecting not to notice the import of her young mistress’s words or the agita-

tion with which they were spoken ; ' you should have some one that knows your ways. I might be able to save you trouble, —I am sure I would try to.'

' You are a good, kind girl, Polly !' exclaimed Blanche, with a quivering lip ; ' but that is only a reason why we should not impose upon your good nature. We—'

' Nothing of the kind, Miss,' interposed Polly. ' I wouldn't look for another place yet awhile, if I was out. It's me that wants to stop.'

' Well, if you will, Polly, I shall be very glad,' answered Blanche ; ' and if ever it is in our power—'

' Oh, don't mention that, Miss,' again interrupted Polly ; ' and now that's agreed to, I'll go and look after things.'

So the interview terminated, and Polly remained ; and on the day following the acceptance of Mr Grainger's offer Blanche informed her of the circumstance, concluding by observing,—

‘And so, Polly, when the sale is over, we are going to live in the Black Country.’

Now the phrase ‘the Black Country’ evoked an association of ideas in Polly Mansell’s mind. Mr Wilkinson lived in the Black Country; and Polly, if she did not exactly love that amateur ‘comique,’ went so far towards doing so as to make the idea of living near him, of their meeting frequently instead of at rare intervals, a pleasant one; and this feeling, combined with her regard for the family, gave rise to an idea which she at once proceeded to broach.

‘Is the situation a good one?’ she said, speaking with some symptoms of confusion. ‘I mean, Miss, will you—you’ll still be keeping *some* servants?’

‘I dare say we will,—one or two,’ answered Blanche.

‘Then I could go, then?’ said Polly, questioningly.

‘No, Polly,’ said Blanche, shaking her

head; 'we may keep a servant, but I shall certainly not be able to keep a maid.'

'I didn't mean as a maid, at least not altogether,' said Polly. 'If you had one for cook and general, I could do the rest with a charwoman now and again.'


'Oh no, Polly,' said Blanche, 'we have allowed you to sacrifice yourself sufficiently already. That would be going back in the world, instead of rising in it.'

'That would depend, Miss,' said Polly.

'Upon what?' asked Blanche.

'Well, I mightn't be a servant all my life,' answered Polly, with a half-saucy smile.

'Oh, of course not; indeed, I hope not,' said Blanche, smiling in her turn, for she had a pretty good idea that there had been tender passages between Wilkinson and Polly, and the latter's significant manner causing her to remember this, she understood the drift of Polly's 'that depends.' 'Of course, Polly,' she con-



cluded, 'if you really wish to go with us, we shall be only too happy to have you; and, whenever you wanted, you could leave us, either to give up service or better yourself in it.'

So when the sale of their house and goods was over, and all their possessions had passed away from them, the Vernons removed to the Black Country, and their place in Stonebury knew them no more.

BOOK II.

THE GREAT HOPEWELL STRIKE.

CHAPTER I.


THE PARSON.

BY its name the Black Country in a great measure describes itself. Blackness is its leading characteristic. Even in its large towns, in which only the milder of its manufacturing operations are carried on, and in which sanitary appliances are more largely employed to do battle with the smoke demon, griminess prevails to a marked extent, while in its village districts—the Black Country districts proper, those in which its mines and forges are situated, and its miners and iron-workers and their families

have their dwelling-places,—blackness is all-abounding. Its furnaces, burning ceaselessly day and night, blacken the sky with their smoke ; the dust and waste of its mines blacken the earth, the houses, and the little vegetation that exists in such parts, and during a great portion of their existence its inhabitants also are black with the grime of their blackening employments. They are rough districts, too. Unpaved, undrained, ill-lighted, their narrow, straggling, slushy roads run sometimes between black, gloomy, overshadowing pit banks, sometimes through open fields, strewn with the *débris* from mines and works, and not unfrequently dotted with unfenced or ill-fenced shafts of disused pits, associated with which there will, more likely than not, be some harrowing story of suicide or ghost adventure. Altogether, the village districts of the Black Country, viewed as places of residence, are the reverse of desirable,


especially to those not native and to the manner born. Happily, however, blackness, whether moral or physical, is rarely blackness without relief. In the neighbourhood of mining villages there is frequently to be found some bit of green border-land,—some spot passably pleasant in itself, and made to appear doubly so by contrast with its surroundings. And it was in one of these green oases in the desert of blackness that the Vernons found a home on going into the Black Country.

Mount Pleasant, as it was called—and it was not unfairly named—formed a sort of aristocratic head-quarters to the system of villages in which the chief of Mr Grainger's mines and works were situated. It was a piece of lofty table-land, about half a square mile in extent, and two miles distant from the nearest forge or pit. It was tolerably well fringed with trees, commanded a rather nice view,




looking *from* the Black Country, and was approached by a good private road. Its houses were commodious and well-built, and its inhabitants were, after their kind, select, so that here again it befell the Vernons to find their lot cast among the coterie constituting the 'society' of the place.

It was Mr Grainger himself who had 'spotted' Mount Pleasant as an eligible building site. He had always made it a rule of his business to try to secure first-rate managerial talent, and in connection with this point he had at first found the question of residence a stumbling-block. There was rarely a house suitable for a manager in the immediate neighbourhood of a works, while managers would have objected to such immediate neighbourhood even if there had been. They fixed their homes in adjoining towns; and, in addition to losing time in travelling to and from their work, were not get-at-able in case of a



break-down or any other such emergency occurring when they were away from the works. While casting about for a remedy for this state of affairs, Mr Grainger's eye had fallen upon Mount Pleasant, then called Beech-nut Hill, the trees that belted it being most beeches, and as he beheld it his thought was Eureka. He had found the way out of his difficulty. The Mount would make a pleasant and select suburb, a suburb in which even managers would not disdain to dwell,—in which the objections that applied to isolated houses close to mines or furnaces would not exist.

He obtained a lease of the property, and having laid out the ground, built upon it a mansion for himself, a number of large villas for his managers, and two rows of smaller semi-attached villas, which, though christened respectively Beech-tree Terrace and Daisy Crescent, came to be popularly known as Foremen's and Quill-drivers' Rows, as the one was occupied by



his leading foremen, the other by his leading clerks. From that time he had made a residence part of the remuneration of the classes of his staff thus provided for, and as the place grew popular he had added other residences, which were let to proprietors and managers of works other than his own, and other 'big guns' of the district.

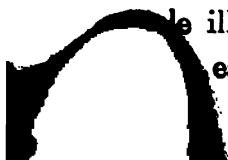
Among the latter division of tenants was one who, after Mr Grainger himself, was, perhaps, the best known and most influential man in those parts,—the Rev. Albert Charles Grahame, commonly known, and by the work-people of the neighbourhood always spoken of, as 'The Parson.' He was minister of the church that served as a parish one to a number of the scattered villages in which Mr Grainger had works, and was a distant connection of the nobleman in whose gift the living was. In consideration of the last-named circumstance the polite dwellers on Mount Plea-

he had come to know that as a Black Country parson he was the right man in the right place; that he could do more good where he was than he would be likely to be able to do elsewhere, or than another man coming newly into his place would be likely to do there; and though not a much-professing or self-trumpeting Christian, he was much too true a one to value an increase of income before an assured opportunity of doing good in his office.

According to some standards he would scarcely have been considered a good parson. He was not a formalist, or a pietest, or a bigot. Out of church he was not always strictly clerical in his attire, —he relished his cigar and glass of grog, enjoyed a good novel, or good company, was greatly given to whist, and altogether acted upon a decidedly broad interpretation of the belief that—

‘Religion never was designed
To make our pleasures less.’

If he did not exactly preach, he made no attempt to conceal his acquiescence in the doctrine that there were more roads to heaven than the one that lay direct through the Church of which he was a minister, and when occasion had arisen to rebuke pharisaical self-righteousness he had not hesitated to point out that religion did not consist in church or chapel going alone, and that a man who regularly attended might be a worse man, a less true Christian, than one who never entered a place of worship. It was chiefly the families from the Mount that sat under him. Those among the villagers who were actively religious were mostly Methodists, who went to the little Bethels and Zions scattered about the neighbourhood, and sat under local preachers—men who followed manual occupations during the week, and officiated as ministers on Sundays, and who, if as a rule ill-educated, were as a rule also sincere, earnest, and self-sacrificing. To the



good qualities of these preachers and the simple faith of their congregations Mr Graham did full justice, while both preachers and congregations, though frequently given to denouncing the Established Church and its ministers generally, had ever a good word and a high respect for *the* parson; and this, too, was the feeling towards him of the large bodies of workmen who were of no congregation whatever.

His physical constitution gave him a tendency to muscular Christianity. He was a little over middle height, with pleasantly if not very regularly cut features, a cheery expression, and weather-browned complexion. Broad-shouldered, broad-chested, and large limbed, he required exercise to keep him from becoming corpulent, and would in all probability have been a hunting parson had his lines fallen in a hunting country. Placed as he was, he had to let off his muscular steam through other channels. He would often tramp

many miles in a day going from village to village, and cottage to cottage, wherever sickness or distress was to be found. He was a more than honorary member of several workmen's cricket clubs, and he took an active interest in the formation and progress of their literary institutions, co-operative enterprises, volunteer rifle corps, brass bands, and pleasure excursions. Whenever there occurred in the neighbourhood any of those accidents so frequent in mining districts, he was always one of the first on the ground, one of the boldest and most active and useful in rendering assistance. More than once he had joined the first party of volunteer searchers, who in the hope of saving the lives of comrades had gone down into a newly-exploded pit, knowing that each man carried his life in his hand, that at any moment they might be all blown into eternity, that the explosion that had brought them there might be only one of a series.

On one occasion—and the story was a household one in the district—he had even stopped a prize-fight, by personally stepping into the ring, and separating the combatants. One Sunday morning, when he had only been about three years in those parts, and his influence was by no means so great as it subsequently became, the ‘Bankside Nobbler’ and ‘Puncher’ Briggs, the pugilistic champions of two rival villages, had met for what was technically known as ‘a rough turn up’ for ten pounds a side. The field of fight lay on the parson’s way to church, and as he passed the battle was briskly proceeding amid the shouting and cheering of some hundreds of excited spectators. Working his way through the crowd, he called upon the men to desist; but finding remonstrance of no avail, he sprang into the ring, and stepping between the champions as they were sparring, thrust them back. The lookers-on were a godless lot, and some of ‘Puncher’s’ backers, who had

come from a distance and knew little or nothing of the parson, called out to their man to 'let him have it;' but though he looked 'ugly' for a moment, he did not raise his hand, and after a while sullenly agreed to the parson's suggestion that the antagonists should shake hands and consider the fight a draw, though neither 'Puncher' nor the 'Nobbler' could be brought to accede to his further proposition, that they should accompany him to church.

That such a parson should be immensely popular in such a district will be easily understood. On one matter, of private taste, however, popular sympathy did not go with him. He made Stephen Barber his chief friend, and the many 'wondered' that he should do so. To them such a friendship seemed altogether against the general fitness of things, as, indeed, it really would have been had their view of Barber's character been correct;

but they misjudged him. They were wrong in attributing his influence over Mr Grainger to toadyism upon his part; in believing that he would do *anything* at his employer's bidding, no matter how unjust it might be in itself or however hardly it might weigh upon others. They knew that in some things that had borne oppressively upon large numbers of them the directing voice had been his, even though the executing hand had been Mr Grainger's; but they did not know that at other times he alone had prevented Mr Grainger from entering upon oppressive action. Nor could they understand that neither in the one case nor the other had he been swayed by any animus towards them; that his was merely the interest of a strategist, bent on carrying out or thwarting a plan irrespective of considerations as to how the pawns in the game might be affected. To them, judging by their lights, he seemed an altogether hateful being, a sycophant *to*

power, a heartless tyrant where he had power. In a word, as they phrased it, 'a bad lot.'

Holding this estimate of his character they were naturally surprised that he should be chosen as a friend by the parson, who truckled to none, was tyrannous to none, would reprove a master as readily and pointedly as he would a workman, and, upon the whole, leaned to the side of the workers. But the parson understood Barber's half cynical, half epicurean nature, and liked it. Moreover, they had several points in common. Both were bachelors, both were well-educated, well-read men, with a somewhat philosophical bent of mind ; men who, though thoroughly practical in the concerns of everyday life, liked occasionally to discuss and speculate upon the world and 'poor human nature' in the abstract. Each felt, too, that but for the other they would, to a great extent, have been alone in a crowd. So they had become and remained fast

friends, the 'wonder' and criticism of the little world in which they lived, notwithstanding. In their turn they sometimes criticised the little world and its sayings and doings, and certainly got more amusement out of doing so than the others got out of criticising them.

Often, when disengaged of an evening, the parson would drop in to supper with Barber, who, though a bachelor, kept up a very good establishment, and had always a cozy room, and choice eatables, drinkables, and smokeables on hand. One night, about six weeks after the Vernons had removed to the Black Country, he had made one of these friendly calls upon Barber, and having finished supper, the two were seated in a little smoking snugery to which they had withdrawn, and over cigars and punch were enjoying a desultory chat; and as their conversation turned upon matters relating to our story, we will record a portion of it.

The Vernons had been known by reputation to the people of the Mount, who had been greatly exercised on hearing that they were coming to live among them. How were they to comport themselves towards the family of a man who had shuffled off this mortal coil in such manner and under such circumstances as Clive Vernon had done? Was it, or was it not, 'the thing' to visit such sins of a husband and father upon a wife and children? Would their gentility be smirched by association with such a family? A few short months before and the best of those to whom these considerations 'gave pause; would have been proud to have been known by the Vernons. But the mighty were fallen, and the Mount Pleasants were not so poor of spirit as to do them reverence in their broken state, and debated within themselves whether they should even patronize them. The matter, however, was soon decided. The parson

—the born aristocrat, the true gentleman, the ‘connection’ of more than one noble family—sought the acquaintance of the Vernons, and Mr Grainger pointedly showed that they were people whom he delighted to honour, and, seeing this, the Mount hastened to follow the lead of its two great men, and left its cards upon the new-comers. And the Vernons, who, of course, had known nothing of the qualms of the majority, took all as being done in a kindly spirit, and on the day preceding the evening of which we are speaking they had for the first time given a modest little dinner to a few of the more attentive of their new neighbours. Mr Grainger had been there, and so also had the parson and Stephen Barber, and it was of this dinner that the two latter were talking.

‘What is Grainger’s motive in taking the family up in the way he has done?’ questioned the parson. ‘Of course he *has* a motive?’

‘He has,—and a strong one.’

‘And an interested one, too.’

‘Well, I took that to be understood in your “of course;” still, in some respects it is by no means such a merely selfish motive as he is usually influenced by.’

‘It seems to me that he is inclined to court the widow.’

‘He is courting her, but only in a secondary degree. He is courting her to get her to court her daughter for him.’

‘Oh-o-o!’ exclaimed the parson in surprise; ‘sits the wind in that quarter?’

‘It does. Very much in that quarter, as the slang phrase has it.’

‘Oh, my idea merely was that he might be thinking of trying to get a handsome, polished, well-born wife to put at the head of his establishment: it’s a kind of thing that is often a point with men like him.’

‘I’ve no doubt his views include that,’ said Barber; ‘but his chief idea is that

he is desperately in love with Miss Vernon.'

'And that she *isn't* desperately in love with him,' said the parson.

'Why do you suppose that?' said Barber, smiling.

'Simply because you say he is trying to approach her through her mother. I can't believe in even love taking the self-confidence out of him so utterly as to make him too diffident to personally approach the inexpressive she of his hopes, if it were his cue to do so; as of course it would be if he thought she loved him.'

'You are quite right. Unless she has discovered it lately, she doesn't even know that he has a more than friendly feeling towards her; and she is not only not in love with him, but she is in love with another,—another, too, who *has* told his love, and who came, and saw, and conquered *after* our friend had set his mind upon conquering, and considered himself well on the way to victory.'

‘What!’ said the parson, laughing, ‘and she not even aware of the nature of his feelings?’

‘Well, you see he had faith in and was acting upon the theory, that by clever and careful cultivation friendship may be developed into love, where there is no spontaneous passion to check the growth.’

‘But the spontaneous passion having come in this case, how does the matter stand?’

In reply Barber proceeded to give him an outline of ‘the situation’ as it has been shown to the reader, omitting, however, the circumstance that it was Grainger who had moved the money-lender to action.

‘Of course,’ he concluded, ‘the so far successful rivalry of this Harding roused the devil in him. He has spoken his “I will” about having her, and it is to that end that he has taken up the family, and from his stand-point it is a good move. The mother is ambitious, and chafes at

their come-down in the social scale, especially as she will easily guess that there will be plenty in Stonebury rejoicing over their downfall. The brother likes ease and plenty, and is used to depending upon others for them; and apart from their self-interest in the matter, both the mother and he take the marriage market view of matrimony as it affects girls. They'll be two good friends in court, and then the girl herself is warm-hearted and grateful, and Grainger is the kind friend, and benefactor, and so forth, of the family. Those are the circumstances he depends upon; but it's my opinion he'll find the single circumstance on the other side, of her being in love with another, too much for him—in the end, that is.'

'Do you think he'll follow the game out to the end—if he finds that it is going against him, I mean?'

'I'm sure he will,—to a bitter end, too. I-will-ism, as I have told himself, is certain

to lead to bad results in a matter of this kind.'

'Well, for my part, I shouldn't have supposed him to be a fellow likely to be seriously affected by love affairs. Indeed, the very fact of his being so attentive to the Vernons had suggested to me that such matters sat very lightly upon him. According not only to the talk of the place, but to things I noticed myself, he seemed to me at one time to be as deeply smitten as I took him to be capable of being over young Wilkinson's sister.'

'Ah, yes! That was just before he got acquainted with the Vernons. Poor Flo! I think she was really very fond of him even apart from his being the great Mr Grainger. I dare say she is greatly disappointed that her beauty did not quite carry the day; but, as I fancy, the smile so far as he was concerned was much more fleshly than sentimental.—it is, perhaps, well for her that the Vernon affair turned up.'

‘Perhaps it is well in a double sense, then,’ said the parson, smiling, ‘for an’ gossips speak true, young Vernon is making strong love to her now.’

‘Oh! Well, I was thinking that it could scarcely be solely for sake of the “Lion Comique’s” society that he went to their house so much; and speaking of the “Lion,” an’ there be any truth in the tattle of our clerks, he is courting that handsome servant of Vernon’s, so that the family’s coming here has led to a round of love-makings—quite a comedy of love for us lookers-on.’

‘Well, yes,’ said the parson; ‘but changing the subject, it strikes me that some of us will soon have something beside love-making to occupy our attention—the men at the Hopewell forges are very much inclined to kick against the Grainger administration.’


‘Oh! I hadn’t heard anything, though I’m not surprised. From their point of

view it will, of course, contrast very unfavourably with the administration of the late owners; still I think they had better set it down as the inevitable, and accept it. When he took the lease he spoke very grimly of the probability of something of this kind, and you may depend upon it he is prepared to meet it. If they do kick they'll find it a kicking against the pricks.'

'Do you think he would let them strike rather than even compromise with them?—some of the new regulations he has introduced are undoubtedly hard.'

'I think they had better leave well alone. If they do tackle him they'll find him a Tartar. Do you speak as from them?'

'I don't speak by their authority, but I know from them that they contemplate striking, and I would do anything I could to see a strike averted. It always causes suffering and ill-will; and this one, if it takes place, is sure to prove a bitter one;



they are a different set of men from most of the others he has had to deal with in such matters.'

'They are a rough lot, aren't they?'

'Well, yes, like the majority of their kind, they are; but that was not what I meant. They are strong Unionists, and one of their number is one of the great guns among the trade-union leaders of the country, and if they do strike it will be under his guidance, and with the sanction and support not only of their own union, but of other unions likewise. It would be a thoroughly organized affair, and if it is brought about it is just possible that Grainger may find that *he* has caught a Tartar. Of course, Barber, I'm telling you all this in a friendly way, knowing that if it doesn't—as I hope it will—influence you towards trying to maintain peace, you won't use it unfairly on the side of war.'

'Well, if I had to act in the matter,

what you tell me *would* incline me to peace. I would certainly make concessions rather than risk a big strike, that was likely to attract the notice of the papers, and bring "our own correspondents" on to the ground: there are points in Grainger's system that if adversely "ventilated" by the press, would tell against him, not only in the one affair, but all over his business. So much, if the necessity arises, I will point out to him; but to say that I thought that my doing so would influence him would be a case of crying peace, peace, where there is no peace. In him combativeness is stronger than prudence or even acquisitiveness, and if their not striking depends upon his yielding to milder pressure, it will certainly be a case of war.'

'It will be war to the knife, then,' answered the parson, emphatically. 'Burn-my-heart-out is as combative and determined as he, and the general body of the

workmen will follow his lead, and I must say that in this instance I think they will have the juster cause.'

'Burn-my-heart-out!' echoed Barber, looking up with a half surprised, half amused expression on his face.

'Yes; Jim Harrison, the Union leader, I speak of. You know him, don't you?'

'Well, it may be arguing myself unknown to say so, but I don't. But, Phcebus! what a name, or rather what a nickname! Burn-my-heart-out! Wherefore is he Burn-my-heart-out?'

'Well, thereby hangs a little, and somewhat characteristic, tale. Though, in the slang of the sensation religionists, he would scarcely rank as "the converted forgerman," he is a greatly reformed man. At one time he was a decided desperado, a drinking, swearing, scamping, fighting fellow, who seldom worked at his trade, but made a living partly as a professional

pugilist, partly as a poacher. In the latter capacity he was at length captured, and sent to jail. When, on the expiration of his sentence, he was leaving the prison, the chaplain gave him some trifling sum out of a fund of which he was an almoner, and while doing so urged him to give up drinking and smoking, saying, among other things, that apart from the moral evils to which they led, drink was poison, and tobacco burnt the heart out; whereupon Mr Harrison walked straight to the nearest public-house, and before a lot of miners and forgemen who—as it happened to be a Monday after a reckoning—were drinking there, roared out for “A pint of poison, and a pen’orth of burn-my-heart-out.” Of course such an order excited curiosity, and when he had explained the circumstance that gave it meaning, it was regarded as a delightful stroke of practical humour, in approval and commemoration of which the nickname was at once

bestowed upon him. Therefore is he Burn-my-heart-out.'

'And what of his reformation?' asked Barber, in a tone of interest.

'Well, he was rather a rough fellow than a bad one. There were fine qualities in his nature. Though he would purposely pick a quarrel with any man who was reputed to be as good or a better pugilist than himself, he was always ready to take the part of the weak. In his ring-fights he was noted for a chivalrous manner, for never availing himself of petty technical advantages; never bearing malice when beaten, or unduly triumphing when victorious; and when from winning a fight he was in funds, he shared them generously with any of his ne'er-do-well acquaintances, who were in distress. Better than all this, he was always a brave helper when accidents took place about the mines, and it was in connection with this latter phase of his character that his reform-

ation was brought about. When the new shaft to the Stoneleigh pit was being sunk the bratticing gave way towards the bottom, and shut in one of the workmen. The earth hadn't fallen in, but as it was liable to do so at any moment, no one would venture to go down till Burn-my-heart-out chanced to come on the scene.


“ “ Was there any one in the shaft?” he asked.

“ “ Yes,” the lookers-on told him with a certain significance; “ Christian Joe Brown was.”

‘ This was a Methodist local preacher, who was called “ Christian Joe ” to distinguish him from another Joe Brown in the same employ, who had much more of the heathen than the Christian about him, and who (Christian Joe) had on divers occasions specially lifted up his voice against Burn-my-heart-out. If there were any, however, who thought that Harrison would show anything like

triumph or grim satisfaction at hearing that it was the preacher who was in deadly peril, they did not understand the man. He merely answered, "Well, if we can't save him, I dare say he's fitter to die than most of us; but that is no reason why we should not try to get him out; and if no one else will chance it, here goes." So he had himself lowered down, sawed through the broken bratticing, and succeeded in bringing Christian Joe alive to the surface five minutes before the whole of the shaft fell in. Those on the bank had seen some of the sawn bratticing spring back to its place and jam Harrison in for some time, and on his being brought to bank he swooned, and then they found that he was badly crushed, far more severely injured, indeed, than the man he had saved. He was confined to his bed for weeks, and the people he lodged with being a rough set, the preacher's daughter—at that time a pretty fragile girl of

about twenty—actuated by a sense of grateful duty, went and constituted herself his nurse. As often happens, the invalid fell in love with the “ministering angel,” and I suppose the love was mutual. At any rate, though she was a good religious girl, or perhaps I ought to say *because* she was a good religious girl, she agreed to marry him on condition that he gave up his fighting and poaching ways, went to work, and remained fairly steady during a probationary term of two years. And he more than kept his pledge: love had transformed him. He turned out a specially sober, industrious, and earnest man, and it was at that time he first began to take the interest in politics and trade affairs which has led to his becoming a power among the Union men. At the end of the two years he was married, and he has ever since remained his better self. There is no happier couple in the land, and it is scarcely a figure of speech to



say that he worships his pretty little wife.'

'Well, a man couldn't well have a less clayey idol than a wife who has been his good genius,' said Barber, who had listened with interest. 'It's quite a romantic little history;—he must be a fellow of some character. I'll get you to point him out to me some of these days.'

'Very well, I will, though I am rather surprised you hadn't heard of him before. By the way, though, speaking of that, if you don't know him, Grainger does. I remember, now, that one of the stories of his wild days was of his giving our great man a sound thrashing.'

'Oh, if that is a ground of his knowing him, you may depend upon it he knows him much better than he respects him; and the fact of a man that had thrashed him being at the head of a strike would certainly not be in favour of an amicable settlement; but how did the thrashing come about?'

‘ Well, as near as I can recollect, it was this way. When Grainger first came back from the diggings he put up at the Hopewell Arms, which, as you know, is half ordinary public-house, half hotel. At that time there was a very handsome young barmaid there; and one morning as he was passing through the bar he said something to her, which, so far as her position admitted of her doing, she resented. He had intended to be patronizing, but finding himself snubbed, he turned vicious, and insulted her, by sneeringly implying that he took it for granted that she was—well, the most degraded thing a woman can be. Whereupon Burn-my-heart-out, who was drinking at the bar, called out to the girl,—

“ Slap the d—d cur’s face.”

“ That was more than *he* could do,” Grainger answered. To which the other, going up to him, retorted “that it was what he *would* do if he would step out-

side;" and by way of reply, Grainger laid the other's cheek open with a knuckle-duster. I suppose he had calculated upon disabling or cowing his man by this first blow; but if he had, he made a mistake. Burn-my-heart-out—and I had the account from those who looked on—sprang upon him like a tiger, dragged him out, and thrashed him within an inch of his life,—thrashed him, at any rate, to such an extent, that he had to be carried back to the house insensible, and was laid up for a week or two.'

'Oh,' said Barber, smiling, 'that in a great measure accounts for my not having heard of the redoubtable Burn-my-heart-out before. It is generally through Grainger that I hear of local celebrities, and he was scarcely likely to tell me of one who had thrashed him.'

'Well, no; a less egotistical man than he might easily shrink from the possibility of leading up to the story of a thrashing,

in which he had figured as the thrashed. Still, I should hardly think that he would let the remembrance of such a thing influence him in any trade matter that might occur now.'

'He would, though,' said Barber with a shake of the head; 'the sight of Burn-my-heart-out bearding him in his own office, say, would be as that of a red rag to a bull. He is not the man to forget or forgive an humiliation, either moral or physical,—and that thrashing was both.'

'Especially physical,' laughed the parson; and then the conversation branched off to topics with which our story has no concern.

CHAPTER II.

THE BELLE OF THE MOUNT.

UNLIKE most unmarried young clerks of small income, 'Lion' Wilkinson was a householder. He occupied one of the villas in Quill-drivers' Row, Mount Pleasant, his sister keeping house for him.

When he was about twenty, and his sister sixteen, they had lost their mother. Two years later their father, who had for a long period been a cashier in one of the works that had passed into Grainger's hands, also died, leaving them his household furniture, and a few hundred pounds that he had saved, and expressing a wish

that the son should keep on the house as a home for his sister.

To fulfil this wish was no great sacrifice to Wilkinson, for he was very fond of his sister, and proud of her beauty. And she was indeed beautiful, though irregularly so.

She was barely of middle height, and her limbs, though beautifully rounded and proportioned in themselves, were upon so large a scale that, combined with her moderate stature, they gave her an appearance that an envious person might have described as thick-set. She had a small, ripe-lipped mouth, magnificent dark eyes, and an abundance of raven-black hair, worn short, and in thick clustering curls. But judged by accepted standards of beauty in the female face divine, her chin was a trifle too square, her forehead a trifle too high, while her nose showed a just perceptible inclination to the *retroussé*. These were, of course, blemishes as regarded the statuesque idea of the beautiful; but hers

was not a beauty of mere feature. It was of that higher, more-easily-imagined-than-described kind which lies in expression ; and in this connection her irregularity of feature, so far from being a blot, gave the charm of piquancy. The fascination of her face lay chiefly in the manner in which it was lit up, and made variedly expressive by the flashing of her dark, lustrous eyes, or a passing smile,—in that spiritual *something* that tells of character and individuality, and in her case pointed to a passionate nature and the capability of a quickness and strength of feeling that might easily become self-tormenting. Robust health, too, lent its animation to her countenance, and gave grace to her bearing and buoyancy to her every movement.

There were some of the women of the Mount who would not admit the greatness of her beauty, and professed to be unable to understand what people could see in her

to make such a fuss about; but among the men she was admittedly *the* belle of the district. In their judgment it was Miss Wilkinson first, and the rest nowhere in the matter of local beauties; but at the same time they were as generally of opinion that if she was beautiful she knew it, and was upon the strength of her charms as haughty and ambitious as lovely.

Many were the fellow-clerks of her brother who, smitten by her beauty, had courted his acquaintance in the hope of finding opportunity to worship and win her; but while she had been civil to them all, she had been no more than civil to any.

Like her brother, she was fond of music, though in a somewhat higher fashion. She was a fair pianist, playing correctly, and with taste and feeling, if not with that professional 'brilliance' which, though wonderful enough in its way, has, after all, more of gymnastic skill

than musical expression in it. She frequently played at penny readings, amateur concerts, and other like entertainments, in the locality, and it was on these occasions that her beauty came most strikingly under notice. With looks animated, cheeks flushed, and eyes sparkling from pleasurable excitement; with a white rose set in her clustering dark curls, the trailing skirts of a sheeny silk dress falling gracefully around her, and seemingly adding to her height, and its daringly low-cut body freely showing the rich symmetry of her round polished arm and plump, soft, shapely bust—thus looking and thus clad, she presented a picture that sent a thrill and murmur of admiration through the male portion of the audience, and led to their applauding her performance with a vehemence in which there was much more of compliment to her beauty than her playing.

It was at a charitable concert, which

he had been solicited to allow to be announced as under his 'distinguished patronage,' that Mr Grainger first saw her, and to lookers-on it was soon patent that he, too, like lesser men, had fallen under the spell of her beauty.

The burst of hand-clapping for which her appearance on the platform was a signal aroused him from the fit of abstraction in which he had been sunk during the performance of the one or two items of the programme that had preceded her entrance. As his eye fell upon her it was noticed that he instantly became excitedly interested. His gaze remained fixed upon her with undisguised pleasure while she played, and when she had finished he joined with marked emphasis in applauding her.

Presently he went round to the ante-room in which the performers waited their turns, and was introduced to her. He complimented her upon her playing, and


the self-possession with which she faced an audience, and chatted with her about music as well as his knowledge of the subject would allow. But while he spoke only upon indifferent topics, and was in every way perfectly respectful, he boldly showed his undisguised admiration, and she, while as perfectly self-respecting, let it be seen that she was not ill-pleased that he should admire.

When the concert was over he saw her to the door of the hall; and finding that it had come on to rain, he insisted upon sending her home in his carriage, waiting himself until it was brought back. A few days afterwards he sent her some music that she had incidentally said she would like to have, together with a friendly note, saying that, though he had no scientific knowledge of music, his was one of the savage breasts for which it had charms, and that happening to remember the names of two or three pieces that he was sure

from the manner in which she had spoken of them were very charming, he had taken the liberty of sending them, and hoped that he would at some time have the pleasure of hearing her play them.

A fortnight later, on the day of a concert at which she was to appear, he sent her a splendid bouquet, accompanied by a note somewhat similar to his first, making light of the gift, and speaking of the sending of it as a liberty. At night he attended the concert, and saw that she carried the bouquet, and he saw, too, that her eye sought for him and brightened as it lighted upon him. He saw by the programme that she had selected to play pieces that he had sent her, and he thanked her by a look.

When her first piece was over he again went round to the performers' room, and conversed with, and was markedly attentive to, her. After this he became a regular frequenter of the entertainments to



which she gave her services, and it was known that upon one or two occasions, when her brother had not been able to come, he had escorted her home. This was more than sufficient to set the gossips of the Mount talking and watching, and it was soon rumoured among them that he had been seen walking with her on other beside concert nights, that he was constantly in the habit of sending her music, flowers, and tickets for the more expensive and exclusive *fêtes* and balls of the neighbouring towns, and that whenever he passed her brother's house she was at the window to receive his bow with a regularity that was suggestive of preconcert up to that point, even if not of a system of private signalling. They commented upon these things with all the hate and uncharitableness with which gossips *do* comment in such cases; and some of their talk reaching her brother's ears, he took her to task, but she scoffed at his half-

hinted-at fears, and in a high-handed tone put down the idea of his controlling or forbidding her in the matter.

She hoped, she said, that she had as much regard for her own good name as any one—even a brother—could have, but at the same time she was not going to let the chatter of a parcel of envious Mrs Grundies influence her in any way. Mr Grainger *had* been attentive to her, but his attentions had been most respectful, had been such that had they been offered by any one else the Grundies would never have affected to have thought them anything but a matter of course. She couldn't see that the accident of his being in a good position made bad in him what was harmless in itself. And at any rate she was not going to meet gentlemanly civility by boorish shrinking or rudeness, to gratify a set of scandal-mongers who would grovel in the dust to obtain the notice they

blamed her for accepting when freely offered.

This was the language she held to her brother; but though much of it was true in the letter, there was a certain degree of deception in it. It did not express the true tone or full extent of her feelings and hopes, which went far beyond the idea that Mr Grainger's attentions were no more and meant no more than gentlemanly civility.

Whatever they meant, they went on increasing in constancy and becoming more and more lover-like in their character, until even the gossips began to say they supposed he must be serious, and thinking of marrying her, whereupon the women professed to think he was acting infatuatedly, while men expressed themselves of opinion that he was a lucky fellow. But presently there came a change. His manner towards her became colder, his attentions less pointed. This set the tongues of

the gossips wagging again furiously. They were rejoiced, were sneeringly triumphant over the event, but for a time were perplexed to hit upon the reason of it. At length, however, came reports of Grainger's visits to the Vernons', and the rest was correctly guessed.

The reputation of Miss Vernon as *the* county belle had penetrated even into the Black Country; and the gentility of Mount Pleasant, on learning that Grainger had come within the immediate range of her influence, at once jumped to the conclusion that it was under her star that Florence Wilkinson's suffered eclipse. When the Vernons came to live at the Mount conjecture upon the point became certainty; Grainger's devotion to the family and—its meaning—were palpable to all.

When Blanche was seen, the general verdict was that her beauty—not to speak of her superiority of manner and bearing

—quite outshone that of the local belle, though there were still a few faithful admirers of the latter, who protested that her warmer, more sensuous loveliness was to be preferred. Even after Miss Vernon's arrival Grainger continued to pay a certain court to the other, but she saw that now his attentions were indeed only civilities. His manner had lost the warmth and under-meaning that had previously characterized it, and at times was evidently forced, as though he acted from a sense of having committed himself, and being bound to keep up a formal appearance of friendly gallantry.

Florence Wilkinson felt the change very bitterly. She was proud and wayward of spirit. When Grainger *was* devoted to her she had carried herself with haughty defiance towards the gossips, and she was stung by the thought that they would be able to rejoice and jeer over her defeat. But that was the least part of her

torment. She had allowed her imagination to conjure up and dwell upon bright ambitious possibilities, which to her mind, at any rate, had not seemed castles in the air. She had thought of how grand a thing it would be to be the wife of the great Mr Grainger, to have mansions, carriages, servants, jewels, dress, and all the power of money largely at command; but these gorgeous day-dreams were now dispelled, and inclined her to hate the realities on which she was thrown back. Nor was this the worst. She had come to love the *man* apart from all considerations of wealth or position. His vitality, his strength of character, and undisguised consciousness of power, had drawn her to him,—drawn her to him with a close and yearning feeling of love, of the depth and intensity of which she had herself only come to a full understanding when she found him growing cold.

When alone she brooded over her dis-



appointment with an impatient passionate-ness that at times bordered on madness, but before others she bore herself Spartan fashion,—not merely making no moan, but maintaining a brisk manner and wearing a smiling face. None suspected how deeply she was wounded; not even her brother. Indeed, the latter having accepted the explanation of the relations between Grainger and herself which she had given when he had spoken to her about them, had thought no more about the matter, and had no idea that she was wounded at all.

Dick Wilkinson's hour for leaving the office was five o'clock, and his sister and he took dinner together at half-past. As a rule he was very punctual in this matter; but one day, about a week or two after the Vernons had taken up their residence at Mount Pleasant, he did not put in an appearance until about half-past six, when his sister, who had fumed her-

self into an ill temper, crossly asked,

‘Wherever have you been?’

‘Ah, thereby hangs a tale, Flo, my dear, — a tale of joy,’ he answered, in a theatrical manner, and smiling elatedly.

‘Bring in the dinner,’ she said, turning impatiently to the servant girl, who was standing by.

‘Yes, slave, serve up the banquet,’ called out Dick in the same theatrical tone, ‘but never mind the beer.’

‘What is the matter with you? what do you mean?’ asked the sister, in a half-angry, half-curious tone.

‘I mean, Flo, that we are going to be a cut above small beer to-night: we are going to sip of the glorious vintage of champagne—behold!’

As he spoke he cut the strings of a paper parcel that he held in his hand, and taking out a bottle, held it aloft.

‘I should fancy you had been sipping

of it already,' she said, and this time she smiled slightly as she spoke.

'Well, a little, Flo; I was standing two or three bottles for some of the other fellows in the office.'

'You standing two or three bottles?' she exclaimed, her face darkening again.

'Yes,' he said; 'but you needn't be alarmed or economically indignant. The occasion justified and office law necessitated the expenditure. The wine was to—to what we call "wet" my promotion.'

'Your promotion?'

'Yes; didn't I tell you I had a tale to unfold. Listen; but, soft,—here comes the dinner. I'll proceed to unfold when we have got seated.'

When they had fairly commenced dinner she was the first to speak. 'Really, Dick,' she said, 'you are so given to putting on that stagy, clattering manner of yours, that one scarcely knows what to make of you. Seriously, now, what is the

meaning of 'all this? *Have* you been promoted in any way?'

'Seriously, then, Flo,' he answered, 'I have been promoted, and in the right way,—so promoted that my salary is to be raised from a hundred and twenty to two hundred a year.'

'Oh, I am pleased, Dick!' she exclaimed, looking up at him affectionately.

'I know you are, Flo,' he said with an answering look, 'and you'll drink success to me in champagne, won't you?'

'Yes, that I will, Dick,' she replied.

'Of course you will; that's why I brought it,' he said, filling a glass and handing it to her.

'But what must I say, Dick?' she asked, looking at him with an air of amused perplexity as she took the glass.

'Well, unaccustomed as you are to public speaking, I won't expect a speech from you,' he answered laughingly; 'just say you wish me success.'

‘And—and my love to you as well, Dick, eh?’ she said, her voice softening and trembling a little.

‘And your love, too, Flo,’ he answered, going round and lightly kissing her on the forehead.

She was already in a melting mood, and her brother’s caress brought a rush of tender feeling upon her. She felt her throat swelling and the tears gathering in her eyes, and she experienced an almost irresistible impulse to throw herself upon his breast, sob out her bitter love-sorrow to him, and seek balm in the brotherly sympathy which she knew would have been freely given to her. It was a good impulse, and it would have been well for her had she given way to it. But pride came in and battled it down. She forced back the rising tears, and hastily muttering a few words of congratulation, drank the wine, and forcing a little laugh as she gaspingly put down the glass, said,—

'There, Dick, I flatter myself that one of your fellow-clerks or fellow-"brilliant" could scarcely have done it better, and I'm sure no one could possibly have done it more seriously.'

'I know that, Flo,' he said, taking up his own glass; 'and now here is my love to you, and here at the same time is to the silk dress that I mean to buy you out of the first quarter's pay.'

'Well, but what promotion is it, Dick?' she asked. 'I never heard you say you were expecting anything.'

'I wasn't,' he answered; 'hadn't the least idea of it until the governor came to me this morning, and told me of it in giving it to me.'

'Mr Grainger himself?' she said, her face flushing as she spoke.

'Yes, the great man himself,—not Barber; and, by the way, he inquired in the most gracious manner how Miss Wilkinson was.'

‘Oh,’ she said faintly; and then, as if wishing to hurry away from that topic, she quickly asked, ‘But what is the promotion, Dick?’

‘Well, I’m to go into the Hopewell office, nominally as Vernon’s head clerk, but really, to judge from the significant tone in which I got my instructions, to be a sort of keeper or bear-leader to him, without his knowing it.’

‘I suppose he is a fool,’ she said, harshly.

‘Oh no,—he is a very nice, intelligent fellow in a general way; but he has been brought up a swell, and has swellish notions of business,—thinks it can take care of itself a good deal, and puts off till to-morrow, or to-morrow week or month, what he should do to-day. That sort of thing, of course, does not suit Grainger, and so I am, so to speak, put to pick up the dropped stitches.’

‘Ay, and he take all the credit for it.

It is a good job for him, if a bad one for better men, that he is who he is.'


'Well, I suppose if he wasn't his sister's brother he wouldn't be in the place he is,' Dick answered; 'but, however, as the side wind that blew him there has blown good to me as well, we mustn't be hard on him.'

She had no intention of being either hard or easy on him,—she only spoke in a general way, she said sharply; and then their conversation went off to other topics.

Wilkinson was right in his guess as to the real reasons for his being placed in the office with Vernon. The latter's mother and sister, as has already been mentioned, did not see his various failures as others saw them. They attributed them, not to any incapacity or want of perseverance upon his part, but to fortuitous combinations of circumstances over which he could have had no control, and in this belief Sidney himself coincided. It never

occurred to any of *them* that Mr Grainger had given him the appointment at the Hopewell works merely as a means of making the family an allowance. Had they for a moment suspected that such was the case, they would never have consented to the arrangement; and Mr Grainger understanding them well enough to be aware of this, was anxious to keep up the delusion. At the same time he was not willing that it should be carried to such a length as to do injury to his business, and as a way out of the difficulty, he determined upon placing some one with Vernon, who, though ostensibly his assistant, would really be his director.

Finding, on sounding Barber, that Dick Wilkinson, unlike the majority of young clerks with a turn for amateur performances, was a steady and reliable, even if not a brilliant or enthusiastic, man of business, he gave him the preference in making the appointment, though in doing



so he was thinking less of him than of his sister.

He had really liked the girl, had indeed far more than merely liked her, and he had understood the strength and nature of her feeling for him; and though, as a matter of calculation, he had cooled in his manner towards her after he had met Blanche Vernon, he still felt a kindly regard for her, and was sincerely pleased to be able to serve her by promoting her brother. Florence had instinctively divined that this was his motive in selecting her brother; and though she had of course said nothing about it, the idea that Mr Grainger had still some thought for her had doubtless something to do with bringing about that softness of mood which she had shown when Dick told her the good news.

By this office arrangement Vernon and Wilkinson were thrown into each other's society a great deal, and both being of

a kindly hail-fellow-well-met disposition, a friendship soon sprang up between them, and Vernon invited the other to his home. The first time he had him to dinner, but noticing that his mother was excruciatingly civil, and that even his sister was a little stiff, he upon subsequent occasions took him into the little smoking-room, which had been set apart for himself, and there they smoked and drank grog and chatted and laughed in easy bachelor fashion.

They were in this apartment one evening when Vernon, breaking a rather lengthened silence, observed,

‘This is rather a Quaker-like style of meeting, Dick.’

‘Yes; the spirit doesn’t seem to move us much this evening,’ Wilkinson assented.

‘I don’t think it so much a matter of spirit as of place,’ said the other; ‘in fact, I was just thinking—though I don’t know that the idea is an original one—that there must be a natural law of like

place like people. A lively place, lively people; a dull place, dull people; and liveliness and dulness alike contagious; at any rate, I find the dulness of this place catching.'

'Well, I dare say there is something in that,' said Wilkinson; 'but on the whole I should think that, as Shakespeare says, "it is in ourselves that we are thus or thus." Though I was quiet just now, I didn't feel dull, and I have been as jolly hereabout as I could have been anywhere. Then look at Grainger, he lives down here from choice, and you would hardly say that it had made him dull.'

'Oh, he doesn't count,' said Vernon, with a slight laugh. 'He is one of those beings to whom business is a pleasure. Where his business is, there will his heart be also. With him business is everything, and everything business; but with me business is only one thing—a sort of necessary evil; and when through it I am

tied to a half-civilized place, where there is no amusements, no visiting, no anything enlivening, I must say that I *do* get dull and bored. In fact, if it wasn't for the way I'm circumstanced, I'd cut it altogether.'

'Well, it is out of the world here,' said Wilkinson. 'For instance, now,' he went on, trying to hide a little real confusion of manner under a forced laugh, 'if an amateur down here had ever such great talent it couldn't be brought under the notice of any one who could push it for him.'

'Well, no; the most enterprising of managers would hardly pitch upon this neighbourhood as a likely hunting ground for talent.'

'Even if they knew that there was such a place at all,' said Wilkinson, now laughing unaffectedly. 'Ah well, such is life; "full many a gem," etcetera. However, that is not to the point. Speaking of there

being no visiting here, I know you didn't mean it as a hint, but I'll take it "as sich." There is only my sister and me, and we do things in a very small way ; but if you like to drop in and spend an evening with us, you will at any rate be welcome, and it would be a little change.'

'I didn't intend my grumble as a hint,' answered Vernon, 'still I accept your invitation, so name your evening.'

'Let me see. This is Thursday. What do you say to Monday? will that suit you?'

'Oh yes ;—all evenings are alike with me. I'll be with you ; anything for a change, not that I put down a call upon you as an "anything," that is, only better than nothing. I speak by way of apology for inviting myself, as it were.'

The most momentous passages in our lives generally arise out of commonplace circumstances, which it would have been

impossible to have guessed would have led up to them. The invitation to Sidney Vernon had sprung out of the chance turn of a chance conversation, and he had availed himself of it lightly and laughingly, without a second thought, or the slightest premonition, either of good or evil, to come of it; and yet his accepting it was the first of a chain of events that were destined to form his fate circle in the future.

‘Oh, by the way, Flo,’ Wilkinson said to his sister on the following day, ‘Vernon is coming to see us on Monday.’

‘Coming to see us?’ she echoed in a tone of surprise, her cheeks flushing and her eyes flashing as she spoke. ‘What does he want to come here for? doesn’t he see you every day?’

‘Yes, in the way of business; but he is coming here in a friendly way. When I was with him last night he was complaining about the dulness of the neigh-

bourhood, so I asked him to drop in upon us. You don't object, do you ?'

'No, not further than that I object in a general way to being patronized.'

'Don't be so august, Flo ; in fact, my dear, I may say, don't be so vicious,' answered the brother, in a tone of good-humoured banter ; 'though you have never even seen him, you seem to have a prejudice against him, though I am sure I don't know why you should.'

'I hate him for that he is his sister's brother,' was the passionate answer in her heart,' but she merely said,—'nor I don't know either, unless it is from hearing so much about this—this Miss Vernon, and the Vernons altogether: one does get prejudiced against paragons.'

'Well, Miss Vernon *is* a paragon, that we all acknowledge, from Grainger downwards,' he said, in the same bantering tone, and never dreaming of the fierce pang his words inflicted ; 'but, then, you

know, Flo, I have a personal interest in protesting against a man being hardly thought of because he happens to have a sister so beautiful that men will even sound her praises before other women. Take my word for it, you'll find Sidney a capital fellow.'

She made no reply; and after a brief silence the brother, in a more serious tone than he had previously adopted, exclaimed, 'Why, Flo, I never knew you this way before! If his coming will really annoy you say so, and of course I'll make some excuse, and break the engagement.'


'Oh no, Dick,' she said hastily; 'let him come. I was surprised when you told me, and, perhaps, a bit cross; but let him come, by all means.'

Had she spoken her real feelings she would have said, 'Do break the engagement;' but she was restrained by the thought that such a proceeding would

have appeared strangely selfish and capricious. In objecting to the visit she was swayed solely by a general feeling of soreness against the Vernons,—not by anything in the nature of a presentiment, though to her, also, the coming visit was to be the beginning of events big with fate.

Jealousy is nothing if not unreasonable, and in her jealous dislike to the Vernons Florence Wilkinson never paused to think that they had probably never heard of her. To her mind they were her rivals—her triumphant and probably triumphing rivals — and she resolved that on coming face to face with one of them she would not be seen to disadvantage.

On the Monday evening she dressed and looked her best, and to Sidney Vernon a very glorious best it appeared, when his eyes fell upon it. His was a nature to be enslaved by the sensuously



beautiful, and in the instant of their meeting his heart confessed the power of Florence's rich loveliness, and bowed down to it. Under any circumstances he would have felt its influence,—would probably have become her worshipper. But now surprise lent its effect to the conquering power of beauty. Dick Wilkinson had spoken of his sister as his housekeeper; and Vernon, without giving any particular thought to the matter, had somehow arrived at the notion that she was an elderly, prim, old maidish person; and so when Florence stood before him, the effect was somewhat startling. Except that her dress had full sleeves, she was attired much in the manner in which she appeared at concerts. Her round, smooth, shapely throat was bare; and though she wore a chemisette under her low-cut dress, it was of so gauzy a texture, that it served rather to give additional softness to than conceal

the richness of form it covered. Hers was not the subtler, deeper beauty that grows upon men. It was of the kind that strikes instantly and palpably; and as it burst upon Vernon he felt that he blushed and stammered, and grew confused. She, too—though in a slighter degree—showed signs of excitement, as, on her brother introducing Vernon, she spoke some formal words of welcome; but the feeling that brought a heightened colour into her cheeks, and a brighter light to her eyes, was of exultation. Her thoughts had only been of holding her own against supercilious criticism. She had not adorned for conquest; but when she saw that she had conquered she felt a sense of triumph, a hardened sense of it, which would, perhaps, most expressively have found vent in a cry of ‘woe to the vanquished.’

It was in the small sitting-room of the household that the meeting took place; and

after a little commonplace conversation, in which she bore herself very stiffly, her brother asked her to play to them. She coldly complied ; and Vernon, who had recovered his self-possession so far as to be quite at ease in outward manner, handed her to the piano, and turned over the music for her, and when she had finished warmly praised her playing. He did it in a gentlemanly, deferential manner, and with an evident wish to please.

As he hovered about her she could not but notice that there was a gracefulness in his movements, a delicacy in his bearing towards herself, and a choiceness without affectation in his language, that were pleasant to see and hear, but such as were not to be met with among the clerks who formed the bulk of her train of admirers. She saw, too, that he was a handsome, genial young fellow, and that so far from attempting to patronize her, his suddenly inspired worship of her was humble and

honourable as well as passionate and sincere. Seeing all this, and being, apart from the bitterness that had of late mingled with her feelings, a kind-hearted girl, her manner towards him presently grew softer, and by supper-time the little circle of three had got upon good terms with themselves and each other, and chatted in quite a friendly way.

After supper there was more music and more chat; and then, on a clock in the room striking twelve, Vernon, who was greatly astonished to find it was so late, rose to take his leave.

‘Well, I hope we have not made you duller than usual,’ Dick said, as he was going.

‘I suppose you do find yourself dull in this out-of-the-way place?’ said Florence, following up her brother’s remark.

‘I *did*, Miss Wilkinson,’ he replied, with a meaning emphasis; ‘but then I

had only seen the dullnesses of the place. I trust I did not appear dull to-night. I certainly did not feel so; on the contrary, I never spent a happier evening in my life.'

Florence knew that he had spoken a simple truth; but her brother, laughingly bowing at what he conceived to be a complimentary exaggeration, replied,—

'Come, that is laying it on a little too thick. Still, everything must go by comparison; and if, under present circumstances, you consider this sort of thing at all in the festive scene way, we shall always be glad to see you, if you like to drop in.'

Vernon glanced at Florence as her brother finished speaking, and, after a momentary hesitation, she seconded the invitation by echoing,—'Oh yes, we shall always be glad to see you.'

'You are very kind,' he murmured;

and then he bade them good-night, and went home feeling—well, feeling as a young fellow does feel in the first thrilling paroxysm of love at first sight.

END OF VOL. I.







